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## From the Runway to Directing Moraga Royale

By Sophie Braccini



Dianne Wilson at Moraga Royale Photo  
Sophie Braccini

Moraga Royale Executive Director Dianne Wilson, who has had an unusual career path, is being honored this month as the Moraga Business Person of the Year for turning around the assisted living facility. The former model who worked all over the world before choosing Moraga as her place to live, says that she is very grateful for the recognition and that it is the symbol of what this community has been for her and her family, in the good times as well as the darkest moments.

Wilson spent the first 12 years of her life in a rural Idaho community, "the kind of place where if you did something wrong, your family would hear about it before you got home," she reminisces fondly. Then her father's career took the family to Washington, D.C. - quite a game changer. After college Wilson started a career as a fashion model on the runway in Paris, and was featured on glossy pages of popular magazines. Her agent was in San

Francisco, so one day while visiting the area she ended up in Moraga. "I think that the place had this rural appeal I had loved as a child," she says. While she worked in San Francisco, she rented a cottage in Moraga. This is also where she met her husband, went back to college at Saint Mary's, and decided to start a family.

Wilson, her husband and two boys lived in the Pacific Northwest for a while as land developers. "We decided to come back when the activity slowed down there." Back in Moraga, Wilson saw an announcement for a marketing position at Moraga Royale, which was under different ownership at the time and called Summerville. After a couple of years, the original founders bought their business back and offered Wilson the executive director's seat.

"I took all the classes in order to get the needed licensing to run Moraga Royale," she says, "and then we started turning this place around." Wilson says that things may be done a bit differently at Moraga Royale than at other places because she runs the place with no pre-conceived ideas - just one guiding principle: the happiness of the residents.

Wilson also gives her employees opportunities to evolve and showcase their unique talents. Tina Delgado, who started by doing laundry, now works with Activity Director Eileen Alford, a local business owner of Studio E, and sings almost every evening for the residents. Al Pyne is a former CVS manager who drives the Moraga Royale bus. "We are large enough," Wilson adds, "but small enough that we know each of our residents very well."

Wilson experienced the power of the tightly knit Moraga Royale family when tragedy hit eight years ago after her older son died at age 24. "When it came time to go back to work, I thought I would not be able to do it," she says. "The residents needed me, staff needed me, the families needed me, and I thought I would not be good for anybody. But the very first day I came back I realized that they were all here for me, they were my strength. All the residents here had lost so much, too. Some had lost children also; they had lost spouses, sisters. We didn't have to say anything, they all knew and were 100 percent supportive. It was unbelievable. I learned so much about human nature." And she says that is why the recognition means so much to her, because this town is so important for her. "I felt the very first time I came to this town when I was in my 20s that I had found a place where I belonged," she adds.

Recently both Wilson's mother and mother-in-law moved to Moraga Royale - a testimony to

her belief in the institution. "People who move here thrive; they make friends, they get involved in activities," she says. Local residents from outside Moraga Royale are involved in activities with residents at the facility, such as the bridge group, pinochle teams, Girls Scouts volunteer activities, a knitting group and a Bible study group, as well as support by the Moraga Chamber of Commerce and the annual holiday party put on by Moraga Royale creative chef Gerry Lopez.

Now the center is running at full capacity, with a waiting list, so the focus for Wilson is the quality of life for her 93 residents, ages 68 to 102.

The dinner honoring Wilson is scheduled at 6 p.m. Feb. 24 at the Moraga Country Club. Tickets are \$50. For reservations, call the Moraga Chamber of Commerce at (925) 323-6524.

Reach the reporter at: [sophie@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:sophie@lamorindaweekly.com)

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