

# A Poignant Dialogue

Concert pianist and author to visit Miramonte for special show

By A.K. Carroll

When Miramonte instructor Heather Cousins took her advanced drama class to see “The Pianist of Willesden Lane” in December 2013, she had no way of knowing that a single performance would lead to a myriad of meaningful relationships between students and stories. The one-woman show performed by concert pianist and author Mona Golabek depicts the harrowing story of Golabek’s mother, Lisa Jura, a young Jewish musician whose dreams are interrupted by the dawn of World War II. It is a story of courage and hope, one that moved Cousins and her stu-

dents alike.

Shortly after the performance, Cousins penned a letter to Golabek expressing “how impressed and inspired” her class had been by the performance.

“It really entered my heart,” said Golabek, who called to personally thank Cousins, establishing the start of a fruitful connection. “I receive much mail, and am always grateful,” said Golabek. “Her [Cousins’] words just really connected for me.”

Golabek offered Cousins 30 copies of “The Children of Willesden Lane,” the book on which “The Pi-

anist of Willesden Lane” is based. Cousins was delighted, and taught the book to her freshman English class the following spring. “My students loved it,” she said. “They instantly connected to the themes.”

“It’s an extremely emotional story,” said Miramonte sophomore Sasha Gordon, who was inspired by Jura’s determination and strength in the face of the Holocaust. “It ranks amongst best books that I have read.” Sophomore Leah Woodcox agreed. Her favorite part of the story is when Jura is accepted into the Royal Academy of Music. “It is a real, tangible triumph over the hardships that she has faced,” said Woodcox. “It’s an inspirational moment.”

Cousins’ students wrote essays on the theme of legacy and did close readings of quotes from “The Children of Willesden Lane,” many of them exploring their own ideas regarding what it means to hold onto their dreams. The unit incorporated music, literature and history, culminating in video projects produced by the students. “They said it was the very best thing they’d done all year,” said Cousins.

At the end of the unit, Cousins sent samples of the work to Golabek, along with letters from the students thanking her for the books. Golabek

was deeply moved by Cousins and her students’ work. “She is obviously a deeply dedicated teacher, who goes the extra mile to inspire her students and give them important experiences.”

When Cousins learned that Golabek would be returning to Berkeley for a short time in February, she made contact straightaway, asking if Golabek would visit Miramonte. Golabek immediately agreed and insisted that there would be no fee. “I’m doing this from my heart.”

In preparation for Golabek’s visit, the baby grand is being tuned and three Miramonte English classes are reading “The Children of Willesden Lane.” Cousins is reaching out to last year’s English class, sending them personal letters inviting them to Golabek’s private performance Thursday, Feb. 12.

“I am so excited,” said Gordon. “Mrs. Cousins showed us an excerpt from her show, and my jaw hit the floor.” Woodcox echoed Gordon’s sentiments, “I’m very excited to see Ms. Golabek perform!”

Golabek’s visit will include storytelling and playing the piano, and will reach students who were unable to attend the original performance. “The thought that I will get to see her live



Mona Golabek Photos provided and meet her is thrilling,” said Gordon. “I can hardly wait!”

“Even though my schedule is quite overwhelming, I knew I had to come to the school and present to her amazing students,” said Golabek, who will perform at the Berkeley Repertory Theater through Feb. 22.

In addition to a full month of performing, Golabek is also in the midst of preparing to film “I am a Pianist,” an hour-long documentary on the story of Lisa Jura and “The Children of Willesden Lane.” Produced in collaboration with KLCS/PBS, the film will feature interviews and concert excerpts, including one from the concert at Miramonte. Cousins and her students have also been invited to participate.

“Some stories are meant to be shared,” said Cousins. “This is one of them.”



Miramonte High School students read Golabek’s book in Heather Cousins’ class.

## French Consul General Visits Lamorinda, Pays Tribute to Veterans of Normandy

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Pauline Carmona, Consul General of France in San Francisco, speaks with Normandy Veteran, Warren Jensen (Concord), after the medal ceremony in Orinda Feb. 2. (Note the Purple Heart on Jensen’s chest.) Photo Ohlen Alexander

Yet most of Normandy vets recognized by Carmona and Smith still believe they were just regular guys doing the jobs they were assigned to do – that the real heroes are those who fell in the mud and snow on Europe’s fields of honor.

Carmona respectfully disagreed during a follow-up conversation. Each one was a hero, and is genuinely beloved by the people of France. Formerly the Deputy Consul General of Hong Kong, Carmona is the first woman Consul General of France in San Francisco, the only woman in the French consular network in the United States, and is also the granddaughter of an Egyptian resident who joined the second D-Day in the south of France. As a child, she and her father, a historian, made the roughly three-hour trip from their Paris home to walk the Normandy and Omaha beaches. “With hindsight, we realize that if the Americans had not helped us at that time, we would probably still be under Nazi rule. All of the people from Jewish origin would have been eradicated. France and Europe would have been completely different.”

Smith concurs. She and her husband, longtime Boy Scout Wick Smith, and one of their two Eagle Scout sons have also visited Normandy and its environs. As she read the city council proclamation lauding the veterans, the normally no-nonsense official paused four times to compose herself. “When you see what these gentlemen experienced ... when you see how the artillery rained down upon them” from the Nazi bunkers high above and how the Allied planes were shot at from the ground, only then can you fully appreciate the “enormous sacrifice and enormous courage” of “the surviving heroes in our midst.”

### Do You Know a Veteran Who Is Deserving of Recognition?

If someone you know has an interesting story to tell about his or her military service, contact the Lamorinda Weekly: storydesk@lamorindaweekly.com. More specifically, if you hear of veterans who took part in the liberation of France, please call the Consulate General of France in San Francisco: (415) 616-4903.

Smith concurs. She and her hus-

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