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Sold-Out Author Event Spreads Excitement for Rotary Regatta, Scheduled Aug. 22

By Lou Fancher



Oakland Strokes rowers at a recent regatta
Photo provided

related program will bring Brown to the Lafayette Veterans Memorial Building Aug. 1 for a sold-out author appearance.

"When I thought of the regatta and how we could get interest in the community to participate in something completely different, I felt having Daniel come would bring that initial excitement," says Dan Herbert, Lamorinda Sunrise Rotary member and Chairman of Oakland Strokes. "I had heard him (speak) at the US Rowing Annual Convention about 18 months ago and he was great."

The story he heard - and thousands have read in Brown's book - is replete with a kind of heroism it's difficult to find in American history, which tends to honor individual achievements. Although there's a perfect representative of one person's industriousness and ingenuity in the real-life central figure of Joe Rantz (who was largely abandoned by his family but overcame the odds against him to become a brilliant oarsman), "Boys in the Boat" is essentially a true story of collective heroism, of young men submitting ego for the good of the group. Brown tells the real-life tale of nine working-class boys from the University of Washington crew who honed their skills in competition with their West Coast, CAL Berkeley rivals. Improbably, they went on to trounce elite, Ivy League teams, fierce international competitors and in front of Hitler, the German team at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. Although Brown's storytelling is sometimes overly sentimental and hackneyed (Joe is "poor as a church mouse," just one example), there's no denying the intense research and compelling narrative often told with grace and vigor. It's not hard to imagine that experienced rowers relish the detailed descriptions of techniques and sculls; historians value the period context; sports lovers immediately connect with the young oarsmen's bonding and competitive sparring. And almost everyone is attracted to a story that says it's not primarily external factors of luck like where or to whom you are born that matter: internal substance and character ultimately set a person's destiny.

"I knew about the sport (of crew) from the edges," Herbert says. "When I started (rowing) I was hooked. It's the ultimate team sport combined with individual excellence. The values cross over to all aspects of life and certainly are in Rotary."

Herbert wrote to Brown after the Washington-based author's publicist said he wasn't taking

any appearance requests. Learning the program's purpose (to benefit local service organizations), Brown agreed to appear, lowered his speaking fee, and will celebrate his Aug. 2 wedding anniversary while in the Bay Area. Brown, a Berkeley native, attended Diablo Valley College before enrolling at UC Berkeley. He and his wife, Sharon, were married in Orinda, according to Herbert.

If boats in the regatta fly as fast as the 400 tickets for Brown's visit - "We sold over 100 tickets in the first week," Herbert says - it will be difficult to declare a winner. Organizers are hoping as many as 100 eight-person shells will be filled. Each team will pair two experienced rowers and a skilled coxswain with six novice-to-expert rowers. Anyone age 12 and over is eligible and Oakland Strokes will provide free training prior to the 250-meter races. The event is planned to allow teams to compete in more than one race. Seats are \$200 each. Entire boats consisting of six seats are \$1,000. People who prefer to observe only can attend with a \$20 ticket. Live bands, food trucks, games and a beautiful setting make it an outing for the entire family.

"To our knowledge, nothing like this has ever been put on in the Bay Area," says Lafayette Sunrise Rotary President Buddy Burke in a press release. "Even if you have never held an oar in your hands, it is an opportunity to get some physical exercise, have fun doing so, experience this exciting sport, and know you are contributing to a good cause."

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