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The Del Monicas: A Family of Hatters

By Moya Stone



Christine Del Monica and sister Dina Photo Ohlen Alexander

You may have seen a white Mercedes zipping around Lamorinda with a memorable license plate: Hats4U. That's an apt message on behalf of Lafayette resident and hatter Christine Del Monica.

Christine and her younger sister, Dina, grew up around hats. In 1952 their father Herbert (Sonni) Del Monica and his wife Jean, opened Sonni's Hats on Lakeshore Avenue in Oakland after Sonni learned the ropes from his father's San Francisco hat company. The couple designed and made women's hats in the back and sold their wares in the front of the shop. In those days, business was booming as every lady kept a wardrobe of hats.

From a young age both sisters spent time in the shop. Dina remembers, "When we were kids it was so fun to go into the shop ... we'd play with the trims."

Sonni's Hats sold locally and around the country to retailers such as Lord & Taylor. First Lady Mamie Eisenhower was one among many prominent women who relied on a Sonni's creations. The sisters proudly display article cuttings from the San Francisco Chronicle featuring their father, including mention in Herb Caen's popular column.

Success led the Del Monicas to build a house on St. Stephens Road in Orinda but they only stayed five years. "My mother hated it," says Dina. A very social and stylish lady, she found rural Orinda too far from the attractions of the city. Christine explains that their mother, who had a fondness for singing and entertaining, really belonged in Los Angeles. Instead the family moved to Piedmont, where the sisters finished school.

By the '80s Christine and Dina were grown and living their own lives, but then, as Christine recounts, their mother played a trick on her. "She called me and said, 'We're really busy. Can you come help out?'" Christine started with blocking hats on the assembly line. "One day the buyer for I. Magnin came in and said headbands (1920s style) were going to be big and could we make some for them?" Having studied art, Christine wanted to give designing a try and enjoyed the process so much she became the company's primary designer. "I think that was Mom's plan all along," she says. Around the same time Dina also joined the business as sales manager and the family worked together for the next 25 years.

But like any family, there were conflicts. One being Christine's preference to bump up against deadlines. Dina remembers Sonni pacing the floor saying, "We have two weeks. Two weeks! And your sister has done nothing." He wondered why she did not design a hat a day or a hat a week. The sisters laugh with the memory and Christine adds, "I'd say, Dad it doesn't work that way."

Jean died in 1997, then Sonni, and finally the business closed. Dina went into real estate and Christine took a break. "That was a hard transition for me," says Christine. She thought about living in her parents' Piedmont home but decided to move to Lafayette from Alameda and now with her sister, she is remodeling a house they plan to share.

Recently Christine has ventured back into designing, creating whimsical holiday-themed headbands, fascinators, and hats using vintage trim like feathers and lace from the old shop. She is participating in art shows around the area, including the Orinda Holiday Bazaar coming up Nov. 21. She says she's happy to be back at it and finds her customers inspiring. "It makes it all worthwhile

when I see how happy all this stuff makes people."

Hats off to the Del Monicas.

Find Hats and Other Fun Items at the Orinda Holiday Bazaar Nov. 21

The Orinda Holiday Bazaar, which features over 50 exhibitors featuring home décor, specialty foods, holiday decorations, accessories and jewelry, will be held from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 21 at the Orinda Community Center. There will be over 20 new exhibitors this year featuring items like succulents, handmade cards, lotions, women's clothing, handmade bags, knitwear, decorative trays, candles and paper mache items. Several local nonprofit organizations will also be represented.

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