

Published June 1st, 2016

As City Clerk Olsen Departs, Orinda Loses Its 'Heart'

By Sora O'Doherty



Michele Olsen will now have more time with her family. Photo provided

Three hundred fifty city council meetings over 13 years. How do you measure a career? In dignity, in integrity, in smiles and even-handedness, in cheerfulness, and earnest and caring for all.

At least that's how Michele

Olsen did it.

The longtime Orinda city clerk is leaving, and when asked about it, Mayor Victoria Smith replied, "I'll have to stop crying before I can give you a comment."

After she dried her proverbial tears, the mayor spoke eloquently about how much Olsen, who has been with Orinda as city clerk for 13 years, means to the community. "She is the face of the city," Smith said, and that she manages the council with "poise and dignity."

As much as Orinda loves Michele Olsen, she loved her job. Until one day, last year, when Olsen shattered her ankle in the Tough Mudder race. With 13 pins and 5 plates in her ankle, Olsen was off work for months. She had thought that she was close to her children, but she realized just how much closer she became when she actually had more time to spend with them. Olsen has two sons, 14 and 12 years old, and a daughter, 9. As she gazed into the future, she suddenly knew that she wanted more than anything to be there for them, to mold them into productive members of society through these next, crucial years.

At the same time, Olsen observed that a friend from Orinda who moved to Charlotte, North Carolina, was growing calmer and happier away from the pressures of the competitive Bay Area. Eight years ago, Olsen and her husband had thought about moving to Raleigh, North Carolina, where her husband has family. But now they have trained their sights on Charlotte, and just closed on a new home there.

Eventually, Olsen will return to work, but not for a long while. She wants to be there for her children and really share these last precious school years. Olsen's mother will be moving to Charlotte with her, and Olsen's sister already lives in Boston, so she will be much closer too.

Olsen said that the biggest changes she has observed in her years as city clerk is the advent of more transparency. She has worked hard to get information about the city out to the public, which, she observed, was not easy as a one-person shop working with older technology. Olsen is very excited about the improvements in technology finally coming to Orinda in the next few years. She spoke of Orinda's proposed new website (see story, page A7) with live streaming improvements.

She is proud, too, of improvements in elections - which was her favorite part of the job. She has worked at polling places, and given civics lessons on elections to elementary schools. As a neutral party, Olsen has taken pride in helping candidates go through the election process. She laughed as she commented, "They call me Switzerland because I'm a neutral party!" So dedicated is she to her

job that she will do everything that she can to prepare for the November election prior to leaving for North Carolina.

The least favorite part of her job has been when people have written letters questioning the city's integrity. What won't she miss? The long, late meetings.

But she will miss the people, hands down her favorite aspect of her job. Olsen acknowledges that she is an extrovert. "They call me the heart of the city," she noted, and the mayor concurred, noting that Olsen is often the first, and sometimes the only, contact with city government for citizens. When asked what it would surprise people to know about her, she responded, "That it wasn't just a job for me, I truly embodied this role."

What is on Olsen's bucket list? She wants to compete in an Olympic distance triathlon, take up yoga, travel more and play golf. Her parting words to the citizens of Orinda are, "Thank you for being so involved and making Orinda the amazing place it is. Stay engaged and work together to find solutions to issues that still face Orinda."

Olsen will be replaced on an interim basis by Sherry Kelly, a former city clerk of Berkeley, who has served as interim city clerk in the nearby cities of Walnut Creek, Vallejo and American Canyon. Although Olsen, as the longest serving director-member of the executive team in Orinda, is an invaluable fount of institutional knowledge, she is confident that Kelly, as a retired city clerk with years of experience, will be a really good person for the transition and training the next city clerk.

The city will bid Olsen farewell June 1, from 5 to 7 p.m. in the Orinda Community Center.

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