

Families Without Borders Empowers Students in Sierra Leone

By Sophie Braccini



Terri Khonsari talks to donors during the fourth annual Families Without Borders gala.

Photo Sophie Braccini

From a beautiful home and backyard tucked in the hills of Sanders Ranch in Moraga, a group of Bay Area residents recently gathered to change the world, one country at a time.

During the fourth Families Without Borders Gala, not only did they give money, shared food, and learned about FWB programs, they also enabled a dynamic that aims at supporting the future elite of Sierra Leone while infusing the beneficiaries with a spirit of community service. The non-profit expects the strategy to multiply the initial investment and serve as a model for other non-profits supporting education in impoverished areas.

Terri Khonsari had the opportunity to discover Sierra Leone six years ago when visiting her daughter Niloufar Khonsari, who was working on a Fulbright fellowship at the University of Makeni in the West African country. She says she fell in love with the country and its people. From then on, she and her husband, Dr. Hamid Khonsari, have consistently pursued a mission of creating education and leadership opportunities for young Sierra Leoneans.

Sierra Leone is bordered by Guinea and Liberia; it has a long coastline along the Atlantic Ocean. The country has a lot of natural wealth, until the civil war that killed 120,000 people between 1992 and 2002. Afterward,

Sierra Leone's economic growth's prospects were excellent until the Ebola epidemic struck the country. Today, prospects are improving again but United Nations' figures still indicate that over 60 percent of the six millions Sierra Leoneans live on less than \$1.25 a day, and the average life expectancy is 48 years.

FWB's strategy is to pay for the tuition, housing and other college expenses of college-bound students who lack financial means, supporting them until they get their degree, while asking them to work to contribute to their own living expense, mentor other students, and engage in community service. "We show them that the more they serve, the greatest leaders they will be," says Khonsari. She adds that, for example, her students now mentor the poorest of the poor school-age children, and teach adult literacy classes. According to the non-profit leader, this top-down strategy of empowerment is sustainable in the long term and multiplies the initial investment.

Over the years Khonsari's enthusiasm and truthfulness have allowed her to attract a group of faithful supporters. They all gathered at her Moraga home on May 22 for the FWB gala. The crowd was a mix of Americans of all origins, including Persians like the Khonsaris, and Africans, among many others.

Inez Wondeh, board member of FWB said she is from Liberia and met the Khonsaris through her job as chief operating officer at BASS Medical Group. It is the educational mission of the non-profit that pushed her to devote herself to it.

Floria Hakimi is a friend of Khonsari's. She is also on the advisory board of Moms Against Poverty, a non-profit supporting children in need in Senegal, Cambodia, India

and Iran. She had brought a \$10,000 check from MAP to support FWB's scholarships to help fund FWB's new learning center in Makeni.

During the event, a Skype connection was established with Sierra Leone and about a dozen students interacted with the crowd. Among them was Ibrahim Kalokoh, the first beneficiary and first college graduate of the organization's scholarship program in Sierra Leone. A very energetic and bright young man, he is now the data manager for the Human Trial of Ebola Vaccine in Sierra Leone. He is also country manager for FWB programs, overseeing all FWB activities in his country. He also launched FWB's high-speed internet café and technology center, which is the very first in Makeni.

Khonsari said that all the money collected during the successful event would be used for Sierra Leonean students' scholarships and other local educational programs. She added that her organization wants to empower students who really need it, have the desire to serve themselves in turn, and have leadership potential. FWB visits high schools in poor neighborhoods to find scholarship candidates and partners with other non-profit such as EducAid, a British non-profit that helps poor high-school students, running radio advertisements to inform people of the possibilities of the programs.

Khonsari has been talking with other groups about FWB's pay it forward approach of investing in young people who will consequently support the development of their country and she hopes the strategy will multiply.

As for now, she can't wait to go back to Sierra Leone. She says she lives here so she can serve there. "This is the home for my heart," she adds.

Daytrips & Getaways

Explore the Magic of Forestville

By Fran Endicott



Forestville is now known for good wines and food. Photos provided

The bohemian enclave of Forestville in the Russian River Valley (about 80 miles north, and west of Santa Rosa) has long attracted writers, artists, and counterculture activists. But residents are noticing changes in their quiet town; while tie-dye can still be spotted here and there, tourists now roam the streets – or street – where an original hardware store and pharmacy are nestled between wine-tasting rooms.

The town's architecture is eclectic, modest, and friendly – a built-over-time mix of quaint, free standing buildings, some dating back to the turn of the last century. Bicyclists and hikers love the many miles of trail, and kayakers and canoers flock to the river. But the real draw is the area's wineries, and the luxurious Farmhouse Inn – a romantic boutique hotel with a Michelin-starred restaurant. Proprietors Catherine Bartolomei-Smith and her brother Joe grew up in Forestville, and together they have created a sumptuous six-acre gem that is alone worth a trip to the area.

Featuring 25 varying sized farm-chic rooms with above-and-beyond amenities, the Farmhouse Inn is the epitome of casual elegance. Guests are greeted with the offer of a glass of wine, and a choice of organic bath amenities to take to the room, or take home – handmade soap, bath powders, and artisanal seasonal scrubs. Rooms are lavishly appointed with large jetted tubs, European linens, radiant heated floors, indoor-outdoor fireplaces, private patios, complimentary snacks, and fresh-baked cookies at turndown. The makings for gourmet s' mores (to be heated over one of the many fire pits) are ever-

Gary Farrell Winery, technically in Healdsburg, but just a short drive up the hill, directly across from your Farmhouse Inn home base. It's hard to imagine a better vantage point from which to savor the splendors of the Russian River Valley than Gary Farrell – renowned for its pinot noir and chardonnay. From your terrace perch overlooking the forested valley below, enjoy a plate of local gourmet cheeses selected expressly to complement each tasting as your wine educator explains the origins of each delicious pour.

Head back the short distance to the Farmhouse Inn and lounge by the pool, or on your private patio. Explore the sylvan gardens (designed and landscaped expertly by Roland Crighton, formerly with Valley Crest Design Group and now with Forma Design Partners) and the many seating areas, water features, and vine covered trellises that will likely make you consider a remodel or rejuvenation of your own backyard.

Though there are other restaurant choices in town, a stay at the Farmhouse Inn is not complete without dinner at its charming restaurant. Chef Steve Litke has maintained his Michelin-star status for six consecutive years, and his 'Rabbit, Rabbit, Rabbit' dinner entrée (rabbit served three ways) is legendary. He sources the ingredients for his ever-changing menu from the Bartolomei's ranch, and from local artisan farmers, and the results are spectacular, and a perfect way to end a perfect day in Forestville.

Farmhouse Inn and Restaurant, 7871 River Road, Forestville, 707-887-3300; www.farmhouseinn.com



La Seniorita has Half a Century of Teaching Spanish at Campolindo

By Cathy Dausman



Lola Danielli

Photo Cathy Dausmann

The year was 1963 or mil, novecientos sesenta y tres in Spanish, when Lola Danielli arrived at Campolindo High School fresh out of U.C. Berkeley. The Spanish teacher from the previous year was not returning.

"I thought I'd died and gone to heaven," Danielli said of her new assignment in a nearly new school. More than 50 years and two generations of students later, she is still behind a Campolindo desk instilling her knowledge of Spanish and a love of teaching to every student who takes her class.

It is finals week and Danielli is preparing an 800-point multiple choice test. Students are casually dressed, but the petite Seniorita is neatly coiffed in dress, sweater and her signature high heels. Danielli elects to sit in a student desk near the reporter but there is no mistaking just who is la profesora.

"I'm a hard teacher," Danielli says of her refusal to water down her teaching. "I don't care if you're the governor's son or daughter," she added. It comes, she says, from being raised on a Santa Rosa ranch and living a work ethic which didn't include taking sick days off. She still spends weekends and summers there. Her first formal education was at a one room schoolhouse where her teacher encouraged her to speak English and not the Italian her parents spoke at home. She toyed with becoming a veterinarian but "can't stand blood." She also felt the grade school teacher who in-

sisted she develop fluency in English.

She considered attending what was then San Jose State College before settling on U.C. Berkeley on the advice of her father's friend. She earned an undergraduate degree in romance languages and later earned a master's degree and nearly finished her doctorate. "I love learning," Danielli says emphatically. She encourages each of her students to become teachers and teachers of Spanish, but it is a hard sell when they are teens. "They laugh," she says. But later in life, even those who do not teach are proud of their ability to communicate in a second language, and Danielli is equally proud of them – most especially when they return to her classroom.

She counts among former students a Kaiser doctor whom she met on an ER visit, a Santa Rosa winery worker, a retired judge who was often the only Spanish speaker in his courtroom, several attorneys and a United Nations translator.

She is now teaching her second generation of estudiantes and delights to see parents of current students taking their former seats during open house. "Class of 2016 was a good year," Danielli says. Except for two C grades, her students earned "all As and Bs." When asked the inevitable, the tenured for five decades teacher says she has no plans to retire. "When it's third generation I'm going to worry," she said.