

Published March 22nd, 2017

A leading local philanthropist is chosen as Moraga's Citizen of the Year

By Sophie Braccini



Bobbie Preston in her garden. Photo Sophie Braccini

The choice of Barbara (Bobbie) Preston as Moraga's Citizen of the Year is that of a woman who simply says yes to every opportunity she sees of making the life better for others.

Preston has started several nonprofit groups in and around Moraga because she did not want to wait around for someone else to do what had to be done. Preston is unassuming, never brags about her achievements, and always beams with positive energy. She urges everyone to make these small gestures that do not require much, but make a difference for the community and the world. Like so many who give a lot of themselves, she says that giving brings much more in return.

Preston started her nonprofit career in Moraga in 1986 when she decided to start the Mount Diablo chapter of "Habitat for Humanity." At the time there was no Habitat home in the East Bay and she started recruiting people to build homes in Pittsburg. She said that it is how she learned to start nonprofits with a group of volunteers since Habitat chapters are autonomous. She was in full swing of her medical career at the time, she had recently lost her second husband to cancer, and was raising a daughter. She said that it was in the vacuum of her husband's death that she started the Habitat for Humanity chapter. She adds that philanthropy had always been in her blood.

"My mother was the biggest philanthropist I ever knew," remembers Preston, "She was the director of civil defense in Houston, and she was the first female deacon in the Presbyterian church in Texas." Preston remembers the red phone the family had in their kitchen that was her mother's civil defense command center and that she and her sisters were not allowed to touch it. She adds that her father was also very active in the community.

Preston says that she chose the medical field because she found the challenge of solving a mystery very exciting and picked radiology because of the diagnosis power of the technique. She adds that women imaging allowed her to have a lot of patient contacts. She worked at St. Mary's Hospital in San Francisco where she started a consultative breast service (she later started such centers at John Muir and Kaiser) where the pathologist, the radiologist and the surgeon get together and discuss each patient's best course of action. Preston has now been retired for three and a half years.

The Moraga resident's second charity project was the bicycle-recycle program that has been going on in Moraga for over 20 years. She started it with her new husband, Tom Preston. "I just can't stand when I see usable needed things going to the landfill," she says. The first years they would then take their collection to the Oakland Police Department that had a program to repair and redistribute bicycles. But when the Oakland police stopped the program, Preston had to find something else. She located the Marsh Creek Detention Facility for nonviolent offenders managed by the Contra Costa Sheriff's Department that has a bicycle repair shop. She also found Trips for Kids in the San Rafael area that takes the bikes. She now asks that people drop their unused bicycles on her driveway in November.

Then one day in 2014 Preston noticed how fire blight was starting to invade the pear trees of the historical orchard next to Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School. There was no hesitation on her part, something had to be done. She researched the topic and educated herself on how to better address the issue. She reached out to volunteers, procured tools - at a discount or even donated - from local hardware stores and organized strategic pruning sessions several years in a row.

She recently found a scientist who is now collaborating with a Saint Mary's professor who is a friend of Preston's to devise the best way to make these trees strong enough to last another 100 years. "If the trees disappear, the town will have to change its symbol," she says with a smile.

Preston's most demanding and all-compassing philanthropic effort of the last two years has been her involvement with "No One Left behind," a program that promised native Afghans and Iraqi who helped

Americans during the military presence there that they would get safe passage for themselves and their family if need be. Starting the local chapter of the group that supports new refugees, Preston organized a phenomenal network of mentors, tutors and donors, a vast majority from Moraga, and a sizeable number from Orinda, Lafayette and Walnut Creek, to help 200 immigrant families get settled and acclimated in the United States.

Preston says that like the bicycles that keep coming up from Moraga -close to 300 every year - an enormous quantity of furniture and supplies kept coming to her to help the refugees. Locals also gave their time and knowledge as mentors and tutors to support the families.

Preston herself gave her time and energy to the limit of what her body could give and she broke one leg after the other during the furniture transportation operations. It did not stop her at first, but becoming more reasonable, she has now cut back on her responsibilities and is simply in charge of the speaking engagements for the group. She says she is looking forward to having more time to spend in her garden and at the Moraga Garden Farms where she has been a member for six years.

The Moraga resident explains that what she wants today is to share her experience with others and encourage them to do a little something. For example, in front of her house she has installed a small exchange library where people can leave or take a book. She now would want to make it bigger and have a children section. She and her husband spend time painting benches and fences in the parks in Moraga, also another little thing that anyone can do and contributes to the welfare of the community.

Preston will be honored at a dinner supported by the Moraga Chamber of Commerce, Saint Mary's College of California, the Lamorinda Weekly and the Moraga Valley Kiwanis Club April 22 at the Soda Center at Saint Mary's College. Tickets, available to anyone, will be available on the Chamber of Commerce website at moragachamber.org.

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA