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Diablo Writers' Workshop inspires Lamorinda writers

By Kara Navolio



From left: Andrea Firth and Janine de Boisblanc

Photo provided

Andrea Firth of Moraga and Janine de Boisblanc of Lafayette met in 2013 while working on their MFAs in Creative Non-Fiction from Saint Mary's College. Both authors pursued their degrees in order to hone their craft and tell their stories. Firth has written a collection of personal essays while de Boisblanc is writing a coming-of-age memoir. They both had a passion to help other writers tell their stories as well.

"Lamorinda is a very literary community," explained Firth, "with the great libraries, book stores and other literary programs. But the writing element was missing." Many writers travel to Berkeley and Oakland or other locations west of the tunnel for writing groups or classes. The two women decided to start Diablo Writers' Workshop in March and began teaching classes at Orinda Books and at Firth's writing studio in Moraga.

The classes, which nurture new writers and also help foster the careers of more experienced writers, meet for four to six weeks and focus on writing from life experience for whatever genre works best for each writer, whether memoir, fiction, personal essay or poetry. They employ the workshop method learned in graduate school where students read their work out loud and peers and instructors both give

positive, constructive feedback. "If you do the workshop right," added de Boisblanc, "people feel good and supported even if they may have a list of things to work on."

Student Lauren Matthews of Orinda agreed. "I've gained confidence in my voice, my passion, and my ability to edit and refine my work. Janine has taken the essence of an MFA program (read everything, write often, workshop) and distilled it into a weekly class that is at once challenging and approachable."

Many of the students return for multiple sessions to continue working on their skills in the supportive environment. "I am currently enrolled in a second session of Learn from the Masters," added Lynda Sauer of Orinda. "Andrea is an excellent teacher who provides focused instruction tailored to each individual writer. I have found her class format, which combines discussion and analysis of contemporary writers with opportunities to workshop students' writing, useful and inspiring. She provides a warm, supportive atmosphere in her comfortable writing studio and fosters a sense of community. All of the students in our last class have enrolled in a second or third session and some of us have attended lectures and readings together outside of class." They keep the class size small, about

six to 10 students, to keep the group intimate. "I am inspired by the bond the writers develop with each other," de Boisblanc stated of the small group format. "It's wonderful to witness people coming together, helping each other."

Those looking for inspiration need only ask student Monica Brar of Alamo. "It has been a fantastic experience. She (de Boisblanc) is an excellent teacher, always providing instruction on the craft of writing, a nurturing environment in which to share my work, encouragement and praise regarding what I am doing well, and constructive advice to take my work to the next level. Having the accountability of a weekly class has forced me to carve out the time in my busy day to do something that I enjoy deeply, and I have written some of my best work in this class."

All of their fall classes are full, but new classes will begin in January. Firth and de Boisblanc, who also offer one-on-one consulting and editing services, have plans to expand their offerings in 2018. They hope to add student readings and writing retreats to the mix.

"We are pleased to bring this outlet to the East Bay," said Firth.

To find out about upcoming classes, visit www.diablowriters.org.

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Reliez Valley congestion

... continued from page A2

Residents do not want metering lights at Withers Avenue/Reliez Valley Road, an idea proposed by city staff, which they say will penalize those Lafayette residents living north of Withers Avenue in the unincorporated area.

"It is shocking the city staff suggested metering lights at the intersection of Withers Avenue and Reliez Valley Road," said Lafayette resident and co-founder of RVRRT Roger Chelemados after the meeting. "They know that will make commutes to school even worse for many of our students at Acalanes, Stanley Middle School and Springhill Elementary, including our school buses. They understand this will divide our city and could lead to negative funding consequences for our schools. They just don't care about our schools or reasonable morning access to them. Shocking."

The problem with restricted turn signs at the above locations, is that they lie in unincorporated

Lafayette and, say city staff who have been meeting with their counterparts in the neighboring jurisdictions, Pleasant Hill and Contra Costa County are not prepared to try such restrictions without a detailed study of impacts to upstream traffic within their jurisdictions.

Additionally the residents spoke again of lengthening the right turn lane at Pleasant Hill Road and Deerhill Road along with the left turn lane onto Stanley Boulevard in front of Acalanes High School, which they claim would significantly keep traffic moving at the "funnel" end of the corridor. City staff once again pointed to studies that it had done last year on the intersection, which they say showed negligible benefits for traffic.

Many of the speakers did not approve of the recently installed trial stop signs, which were brought in to address the separate safety issue of speeding, saying that those signs serve only to further slow

down the crawl of traffic in the morning commute.

The Circulation Commission will hear back from commissioner Di Giorgio in January and at that time hopes to send a prioritized list of the residents' input on traffic calming solutions to the city council although as commissioner Adrian Levy pointed out, they have already heard multiple times what the community wants.

Altbaum says in an email to a school board member that RVRRT will be advocating for maximum momentum. "We'll be protesting and keeping our K-8 kids out of school on Jan. 16, the first of perhaps many sit-out days, to picket along Reliez Valley Road, and at city offices, and at Sen. Glazier's Orinda office," although she notes that if Glazier gets involved to facilitate cooperation between jurisdictions, and foster support for restrictive access ahead of the sit-out school date, they would gladly cancel the protest.

TK and Kindergarten registration for 2018-19 school year

Registration for Lafayette students entering TK and Kindergarten for the 2018-19 school year will take place Jan. 16 and 17. In addition, an informational presentation, "A Roadmap to Kindergarten" will be held at the Springhill Elementary Multi-Purpose Room from 6 to 7:30 p.m. Jan. 11 for all interested parents in the Lafayette School District. Further information can be found at www.lafsd.org.

Lafayette Kindergarten/TK registration times: Jan. 16-17

Burton Valley Elementary: 9-11 a.m. and 1-3 p.m., 561 Merriewood Drive, Lafayette, (925) 927-3550

Happy Valley Elementary: 9-11 a.m., 3855 Happy Valley Road, Lafayette (925) 927-3560

Lafayette Elementary 9-11 a.m., 950 Moraga Road, Lafayette (925) 927-3570

Springhill Elementary 9-11 a.m., 3301 Springhill Road, Lafayette (925) 927-3580

The Moraga School District TK and Kindergarten registration is scheduled from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Feb. 1-2 at Camino Pablo, Donald Rheem and Los Perales elementary schools. For information about 2018-19 registration, visit the MSD website at <https://www.moraga.k12.ca.us/childergarten>.

The Orinda Union School District will hold its early TK and Kindergarten registration Feb. 6-9 at Del Rey, Glorietta, Sleepy Hollow and Wagner Ranch elementary schools. Registration for grades TK-8 will begin on the first Monday in March. For information, visit www.orindaschools.org.