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## Hometown owner cares for Phairs

By Sora O'Doherty



Phairs in Orinda Photo Sora O'Doherty

Joanna Guidotti grew up in Orinda and has strong ties to the community, even though she left to open Churchill Manor in Napa 30 years ago. She inherited a half ownership in Country Club Plaza from her father, attorney Aldo Guidotti, who was elected to the first Orinda City Council and twice held the position of mayor. Three years ago Guidotti, who also owns a half interest in the lot behind Phairs, purchased the Phairs property, including the old shop, which has been abandoned for 20 years, as well as the parking lot that stretches from Avenida De Orinda through to Camino Sobrante. Now Guidotti dreams of restoring the Phairs building to honor her father and to meet the needs of Orinda.

Since acquiring the property, Guidotti says that she has heard from a lot of developers, but that they are motivated by the desire to make a profit, and that, she says, is not always compatible with serving the needs of

the community. Guidotti recognizes that Orinda is not like Napa, where she has transformed an old, neglected home into a preeminent destination hotel, Churchill Manor.

When Guidotti first purchased the old Churchill home, built in 1889, people told her she was crazy, that the building was "on the wrong side of the tracks," in a bad neighborhood. But Guidotti had a vision, and in transforming the old home, she was also instrumental in the transformation of the neighborhood into Napa Abajo, now listed as a historical district in the national register. Having run Churchill Manor for 28 years with her husband Brian Jensen, Guidotti is now ready to turn her attention to the town where she grew up. As a tax attorney and investment banker, as well as a successful property owner in more than one state, Guidotti has expertise in a number of related fields.

Not only did Guidotti transform a historic inn in Napa, but her family was involved in the rebuilding of San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake. Her grandfather, an Italian stonecutter who settled in Barre Vermont, the self-proclaimed granite capital of the world, was brought out to work in San Francisco after the earthquake and resettled in the Bay Area. Aldo Guidotti was born in Oakland and his law practice was in the Temescal district, but he wanted his daughter to go to the good schools of Orinda, so he moved the family there when Guidotti was 5 years old. She attended Del Rey Elementary School until she transferred to Sleepy Hollow, then Pine Grove Intermediate School and Miramonte High School. She was in the first class at Saint Mary's College after the college opened to women.

Joanna Guidotti later graduated from the University of San Francisco Law School and obtained a master's degree in tax law from New York University, which is, she explained, rated the number one tax law school. There were only 5 percent women in her class. After graduation, she went to work for Bank of America in San Francisco, becoming a vice president of investment at the age of 29. She met her husband and they closed escrow on the old Churchill home on New Year's Eve, 1987. Since 1988 the two have been running the historic inn together, with Jensen as chef.

When she looks at the Phairs property, she sees a place in a quiet neighborhood, with beautiful views, ample parking, and plenty of space. The old Phairs building comprises 10,500 square feet downstairs and 2,500 square feet upstairs. Guidotti looks at the broad flat roof and imagines, maybe, a rooftop restaurant overlooking the tranquil views of the Orinda Country Club on one side and San Pablo Creek on the other. She aspires to use the property in a community-based, family friendly way. Perhaps part of the property could house an upscale grocery, one that also has prepared foods that could be picked up on the way home for an impromptu dinner. When she looks at another part, she enthuses, Wouldn't this make a great yoga studio?

Guidotti is already working with an architectural firm and having conversations with the Orinda Planning Department. She would like to do something quickly, as opposed to the type of development that could take years to clear regulatory hurdles and building challenges. Living in Napa, she knows that the tourist trade supports developments such as the Oxbow, but, she says, Orinda is not Napa, and she doesn't think that the city wants to be, either.



Joanna Guidotti outside Phairs building in Orinda. Photo Sora O'Doherty

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