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Jay Lifson, Lafayette's 'Energizer Bunny' retires

By Pippa Fisher



Most Lafayette residents have come across Jay Lifson, whether they know it or not. Perhaps they just know the friendly guy with the huge smile in a tie-dye T-shirt. Or maybe they've noticed someone in an orange vest leading a team of volunteers, schlepping traffic cones and barricades at the Art and Wine Festival or the Res Run, or that guy almost always present at city council meetings until the wee hours to advocate on behalf of local businesses. But now this stalwart of Lafayette is retiring.

After 17 years at the helm of the Lafayette Chamber of Commerce, Lifson is hanging up his traffic cones. He leaves a city of thriving businesses and a bustling downtown, which has not always been the case.

Lafayette Chamber Executive Director Jay Lifson is all smiles at his recent retirement celebration at the Lafayette Park Hotel. Photo Jeff Heyman

Hired in 2005, Lifson reflects that his first goal was to "say yes to everything and to become more connected." He loved the friendly vibe of the community but says there was not enough outreach to attract new members.

Lifson's efforts paid off. Chamber membership grew to over 720 members after the 2008 recession, and gradually the events became bigger and bigger; events such as the Art and Wine Festival (which now draws up to 80,000 attendees from all over the Bay Area), the Res. Run, Taste of Lafayette, Rock the Plaza, and others, all of which help build community.

Mayor Teresa Gerring says that Lifson is Lafayette's Energizer Bunny. "If something good for the community and our businesses is happening, Jay is there! Lafayette is a better place because of his creativity and tireless energy."

Lifson's second goal was to become more involved at the city, county and state level, advocating for businesses; something he has done tirelessly over his tenure but perhaps never more so than during COVID.

Current Chamber Board President Fred Steingraf puts it this way, "Jay led the Chamber through good times and bad times, most notably through a pandemic." Steingraf points out that Lifson worked tirelessly to ensure that Lafayette's businesses had all the tools necessary to navigate through regulations, loans, and uncertainty.?

Although Lifson recognizes that COVID was the biggest challenge during his tenure, it was not the only one. He reflects that the recession of 2008 was hard. And there was the challenge of a massive tree falling on the Chamber parking lot, followed just months later by a devastating fire that destroyed not only their office but also those of nine other Chamber members in the building.

With typical Lifson optimism, he says these challenges were an opportunity to reinvent themselves, to be better and that they helped define them, connecting them with nonprofits for whom they could market.

Clearly Lifson is proud of his staff, the board and Chamber Ambassadors. "Success starts with staff," he says. His laid-back management style makes it easy to get the best from those around him. He says he leans toward a collaborative style and builds relationships with others. "Catch people doing things right instead of catching them doing things wrong," he explains.

Lifson is also particularly proud of advances made by the Chamber in promoting recycling in business; an achievement recognized just recently with a Lifetime Achievement award from Sustainable Contra Costa. The organization gave particular mention to the Chamber's annual Art and Wine Festival, noting, "Jay encourages vendors to set up organic/composting, recycling and landfill containers throughout the festival and avoid using plastic water bottles. The event achieved a remarkable 89% diversion rate in 2019 and expects to attain zero waste in the future." Lifson adds this award to several others including Lafayette Business Person of the Year, 2012.

Lifson credits his many prior years in the hospitality industry as being the perfect training for the job. From co-owning Lafayette's Rocking Horse restaurant, to managing the Hungry Hunter, the Lafayette Park Hotel Spa and Duck Club, and Bing Crosby's Restaurant, he progressed from chef to ownership and management, which necessitated managing staff, and talking to guests, and he became more confident and comfortable with public speaking. However the toll of working constant weekends and evenings pushed him to apply for the job of Chamber Director.

"When I took the job, I knew all about people and employees. What I didn't know was how much I'd need to find out about every business," says Lifson, adding that he's had to become an expert researcher, learning about all businesses in order to better serve his members.

"Being the Executive Director of the Chamber of Commerce is a strange job," says former City Manager Steve Falk, explaining, "You're not in charge of the members - but you're still expected to lead them. Jay has served kind of like the Lafayette business community's big brother - not the mom and dad who make the rules, but like the older brother, just down the hallway, who believed in us, who stuck up for us when we needed help, who was always there with an open ear and a helping hand."

Lifson will be missed by many including Steingraf. "Most notably, however, we will miss Jay's ability to fill a room with joy by simply smiling or telling a bad joke." ?

Lifson is quick to point out he will still be there for the community, but he is looking forward to spending more time with family, cooking, working out, and especially for his passion - attending live music concerts.

The man might be retiring, but the batteries on this Energizer Bunny are still fully charged.

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[back](#)

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