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Cathy Chang, 2023 Moraga Citizen of the Year

By Vera Kochan



Cathy Chang's family, from left: aunt Susanne Rheingruber, Chang, daughter Sara Chen-Mei Harrison, son Brian Chen-Wei Harrison, and uncle Dr. Herb Rheingruber
Photo Vera Kochan

Growing up in Taipei, Taiwan, Cathy Chang, Moraga's 2023 Citizen of the Year, wasted no time in making Moraga the kind of place anyone would want to live. As Girl Scout Troop 33778 leader for the past five years, she orchestrated survival and geo-coaching skills, collected unsold Girl Scout Cookies for shipment to Ukraine, and had her scouts package seeds for the free-to-the-public Moraga Seed Library. She instilled in her troop the importance of giving back to the community by contacting the Moraga Gardens Farm and requesting that any of their damaged produce be turned over to her so that she, her two children, Brian (14) and Sara (12), both students at Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School, along with a group of scouts could prepare hearty meals for delivery to the Lake Merritt Tiny Home Project.

Having been a Camino Pablo Elementary School mom, Chang had students turn flats of tomatoes into salsa or pasta sauce and held clothing drives for Meadow Homes Elementary School in Concord, directed students in making lunches for at-need senior citizens, volunteered at the school's book fair, and established the

Camino Pablo Community Service Committee (which held Lafayette Reservoir clean-up days, served food at the St. Mary's Center in Oakland, and sorted donated medical supplies to facilities during COVID). She also opened the Camino Pablo Garden during lunch hours in order to give students a chance to enjoy nature, and organized the "Plant It Forward" project which encourages families to adopt a couple of produce plants and donate the "fruits of their labor" back to the community.

At JM, Chang helped organize screenings of movies such as "Try Harder" to incentivize students to prepare for college (the screenings included food and conversation involving relevant topics), and as one of the school's Diversity, Equity & Inclusion leaders, she has created classroom display materials.

Chang has often included her children in her endeavors such as volunteering at various East Bay Area food banks or helping to decorate the display case in the Moraga Library with presentations of Women's History Month, Learning Disabilities Month, Holiday Celebrations Around the World, and Black History Month. She also hosted community cultural presentations about the Moon Festival, Sukkot and Diwali among others.

As if all of her accomplishments for the community aren't enough to keep her busy, Chang also works from home as a manager of a revenue cycle project (management and development) for a children's hospital. When notified that she was this year's recipient of the Moraga Citizen of the Year award Chang replied, "I am truly honored to receive the recognition, yet I feel that the award belongs to the whole village that made things happen. I am thankful for being part of all the opportunities. You made me feel truly accepted in this beautiful town."

In reaction to his mom's award, son Brian said, "I mean, I knew she deserved it, and I thought it was a great honor. She raised us to volunteer."

"I was like, really impressed," said daughter Sara Chang. "I knew she deserved some kind of award. I mean, Citizen of the Year is pretty cool!"

The Celebration Dinner was held on April 28 at the Holy Trinity Cultural Center. Chair of the Kiwanis Club Citizen of the Year Committee Sam Sperry coordinated and fine-tuned all details of the event. With Fred Weil, 2019's recipient, serving as Master of Ceremonies, Chang was feted by several members of the community including President of the Kiwanis Club of Moraga Valley Gloria Eive, followed by Chang's daughter, Sara, who gave the Invocation.

Moraga Mayor Renata Sos stated, "Cathy has operated with tenacity, a can-do attitude, and a huge heart."

"Cathy is an advocate for more community service in our schools," said Moraga School District Superintendent Dr. Julie Parks.

Supervisor Candace Andersen noted, "So often when I attend these events I feel so grateful that there are people like you."

Representatives for State Sen. Steve Glazer and U.S. Rep Mark DeSaulnier, Don Tatzin and Kaylee DeLand, respectively, praised Chang's value to the community; while friend Bobbie Preston indicated, "Cathy doesn't just teach it - she walks the walk."

Just prior to Chang's personal reflections, her son informed the assembled about the five things that his mom tries to instill into her kids: "My mother does a lot with the community, and she does a lot to teach us to be great role models." Volunteering, friendship, sense of humor, perseverance, and family are the most important points.

Chang prepared a slide presentation giving the attendees a glimpse of the many reasons why she was unanimously chosen as Moraga's Citizen of the Year. Not sitting on her laurels, she encouraged the audience to contribute their time and talent towards helping those within the community and beyond it. "Everything we do has an impact on young children. If you plant the seeds, they will grow."

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