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Chris Swim
Tracy Keaton
 DRE. 00943989 | 01051349
 925.766.1447
 chris@chrisswim.com
 chrisswim.com

COMPASS

William Penn Mott award ceremony returns in person after pandemic



Photo Sora O'Doherty

Winners of the William Penn Mott Jr. Environmental Award, from left: Bruce McGurk and Jan Chushman, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts; Erica Bains, Friends of the Orinda Nature Area, Barbara Leitner, Botanist, and Toris Jaeger, Naturalist.

By Sora O'Doherty

The Orinda Association on Sunday, June 4 presented the 2023 William Penn Mott Jr. Environmental Award to the Friends of the Orinda Nature

Area in a ceremony at the Wilder Art and Garden Center. At the same ceremony, the OA also honored two previous awardees, since they had been unable to hold an in-person event during the COVID-19 pandemic. The award for 2022 went to Orinda Eagle and Gold Scouts and the 2019 award went to Barbara M. Leitner.

The Friends of the Orinda Nature Area support the Nature Area adjacent to Wagner Ranch Elementary School as a natural environment and a historical site with the goal of enhancing environmental conservation for the community. The Orinda Nature Area features 18 acres of meadow, forest, ponds and streams and is a certified Schoolyard Habitat by the National Wildlife Federation.

More than 15,000 children have experienced the Nature Area since 1970 through a variety of programs that help students embrace the connection between themselves and their environment and foster-

ing a lifelong stewardship.

In addition, the Friends present an annual Olive Festival and the Wildlife Festival where adults and children can experience nature activities and learn more about the local flora and fauna. Unfortunately, severe winter storms caused significant damage to the Nature Area which remains closed while repairs are made. Hopefully, it will reopen in the fall of 2023.

Since 1957, Orinda Scouts have beautified areas around the city and enhanced the local environment. To recognize and honor these decades-long contributions, The Orinda Association (OA) chose Orinda Eagle Scouts and Gold Scouts to receive the William Penn Mott, Jr. Environmental Award for 2022.

To earn the Gold Award rank, Girl Scouts must spend a minimum of 80 hours on their projects and demonstrate extraordinary leadership in developing sustainable solutions to local, national and global challenges.

To earn scouting's Eagle advancement rank, boys and girls must fulfill requirements in leadership, service and outdoor skills, in addition to completing at least 21 merit badges and organizing and leading a service project for the betterment of the community. Over the years, many Eagle Scout projects have added to the environment of the Orinda Nature Area.

The 2019 winner of the William Penn Mott Jr. Environmental Award is botanist Barbara Leitner, a native plant expert, environmental consultant and longtime community volunteer. Leitner is a past president of the East Bay Chapter of the California Native Plant Society and a board

member of Friends of Orinda Creeks. She frequently volunteers at the nonprofit Natives Here Nursery in Tilden Park, and her home was featured in the 2023 Bringing Back the Natives Tour last month.

Leitner was nominated by Cinda MacKinnon on behalf of Friends of Orinda Creeks. MacKinnon praised Leitner for a tree survey that tagged and mapped more than 218 trees along San Pablo Creek in Orinda Village as part of a creek restoration project. Leitner, who has lived in Orinda for 30 years with her husband Steve Leitner, has worked for the city as a consultant for over 20 years offering advice about creek restoration.

The William Penn Mott, Jr. award, is given annually in memory of 50-year Orinda resident William Penn Mott, Jr. The award is presented to an Orinda resident, group of residents or organization which has worked for the preservation, improvement, promotion or educational use of Orinda's environmental and ecological assets.

Often described as "Mr. Parks" and a "modern day John Muir," Mott worked for 60 years to create tens of thousands of acres of parkland at the national, state, regional and local levels. He headed the National Park Service (NPS), the California park systems, Oakland's city parks, the East Bay Regional Parks and the Moraga parks department.

At the time of his death in 1992, the 82-year-old Mott was serving as a special assistant to the NPS, working on the conversion plans for civilian use of the Presidio of San Francisco. Locally, Mott was a founding member of The Orinda Association and served as its first president.

Pro bono vocal coach Rena Wilson helps Lamorinda Idol competitors

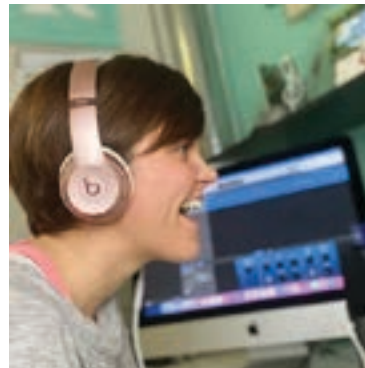


Photo provided

By Sora O'Doherty

Since 2011, actor and vocal coach Rena Wilson has been offering free coaching to young voices hoping to win the Lamorinda Idol contest, and she loves it. She considers it a gift to be able to help the young singers, and program chair Steve Harwood calls her "an absolute angel."

Wilson, with her best friend and business partner, ran Performing Academy and had been coaching private students for the Lamorinda Idol competition. She contacted Harwood and offered to do pro bono training open to all the contestants and Harwood

jumped at the offer. He was very supportive of Performing Academy, Wilson says. Her partner Rene Dewese Moran took over when Wilson moved to Los Angeles, but she continues to offer Idol coaching over Zoom.

Wilson teaches vocal technique and performance coaching. At first, she did the coaching in person, but since the pandemic, she has found that the Zoom conference platform works very well for this purpose.

Her goal is to help the students be more confident on stage, to deliver a more passionate performance, and to engage with the words and storytelling of the song. "Every year," she says, "it never ceases to amaze me; sometimes a kid will come in quiet and timid, but they grow their performance and by the end of the session they are singing from bottom of their feet to top of their head." Competitors have to be good singers and strong performers. Wilson explained, but coaching can take their performance to the next level.

Over the past dozen years, Wilson has had the privilege of working with many families,

and many students she coached have become her private students. Those who follow the contest will know that there are contestants from the same family who appear in different years. "It is such a gift to see a younger brother or sister," Wilson says. In addition, she coaches those students who come back year after year.

Wilson describes her coaching style as "really direct but very positive, creating a warm environment where kids feel supported."

"What Steve and the Lamorinda Arts Council have created gives the kids this beautiful level of confidence in themselves, confidence to create a video and post it on YouTube," Wilson adds. "Kids feel really good about themselves, really positive."

Wilson emphasizes breathing technique, vowel placement, diction, and performance coaching. She wants the students to focus on what the words really mean and how can they convey the story to their audience. This year, coaching sessions will be offered by Wilson in June and July. ... continued on Page A9

Correction: In the May 24 caption about the Lamorinda Area Radio Interest Group spring tower cleanup Matthew Vurek was misidentified as Matthew Vireo.

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