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Iconic Lafayette symbolism changes hands but keeps its purpose

By Sharon K. Sobotta



Photo J. Wake

In her younger years, Lynn MacMichael was a bit of a globetrotter, spending time advocating for peace, opposing war, and doing her best to be an ally to people from all walks of life. Now, as she approaches her mid-80s, she is part of a collective of elders who advocates for accessible and affordable housing for all, inclusivity, acknowledging systemic racism, and making sure that even people in Lamorinda get a glimpse or a visual reminder of the interconnectedness and local relevance of global issues.

In her quest to think globally and act locally, MacMichael visited the city council meeting in the early 2000s, soon after the U.S. had invaded Iraq following a trip that she had taken to the country to make a statement against the war.

"When I came back from Iraq, I went to the city council and said we can't do this war. People who I loved and respected were a part of the council and they all had bought the line about why the U.S. should invade Iraq," MacMichael recalls.

MacMichael and others knew that even if they didn't have the power to stop the war or even convince others to adapt their perspective, they had to do something - even if it was small. "There was a local sentiment of 'what war?' so we started the Hillside Memorial to remind people. We wanted to make it visible and to say that war is not a good thing. It's not good to kill each other," MacMichael says. "So we started."

Across the street from the Lafayette Bart Station is the place, now known as the Hillside Memorial, that MacMichael refers to. The hillside has grabbed the attention of passersby with the hundreds of crosses, handful of crescent moons, stars of David and other symbols. But, getting the visual reminder of the cost of war to the magnitude that it is today hasn't been easy.

"First we put 15 crosses up and then they got torn down so we put them back up," MacMichael says. "Then the word got out and people started joining us - until there were 4,000 to 5,000 symbols."

MacMichael credits local community member Jeff Heaton with initiating the project and quickly gaining the support of MacMichael and a dedicated group of invested Lamorindins who supported the cause and helped both with maintaining the hillside, the visuals and planning an annual Memorial Day acknowledgment.

"I had hoped that we could also acknowledge the Iraqis dying in war, but that piece was complicated," MacMichael says. Still she is proud to have played an integral role with keeping the land and the memorial up and running for just shy of two decades. "It gets harder and steeper as we age," she says while acknowledging her age: 84.

When the owners of the land that is home to the memorial died, they left it to their son, who ultimately decided to sell. This put the Hillside Memorial Board and community members on edge, as they worried that Lafayette may lose its visual reminder of the human cost of war, depending on the wishes and aspirations of the buyer. Today, those who've contributed to the maintenance and upkeep of the memorial and those who think it's simply an important thing to have, are breathing a sigh of relief. Although the land has been sold, it's now in the hands of an anonymous owner, who, according to Board Member Janet Thomas, remains invested in the mission of the project and considers herself a friend of the memorial.

"(The hillside memorial is) such a powerful statement reminding us to be mindful about how we treat each other - at the interpersonal level and (to acknowledge) our interconnectedness at the global level," Thomas says. "We as a board and the new owners agree that the memorial is important to preserve the impact it continues to have on our community and in the larger region."

What the next chapter of the Hillside Memorial will look like as its ownership changes hands is still being determined, but there seems to be a level of certainty around the fact that in some way, shape or form, the mission of the space will stay intact. "There are no specific plans right now. Watching the process unfold is exciting as there's a lot of thoughtful creative talent in our community," Thomas says.

Thomas remains grateful to have a site that is visible both from Highway 24 and the BART station. The board will begin raising funds for maintenance and insurance until the future plans are in place. Although it's

unclear how the space will appear in its next iteration, both Thomas and MacMichael are counting their blessings that the overarching mission begins the same. The one thing they are clear about is their desire to get buy-in from younger generations of Lamorindans. "We're always looking for new volunteers," Thomas says. For information, updates and ways to get involved or support the project, visit www.Lafayettehillside.com

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