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Lamorinda Weekly's Goddess Gardener uses her farm experience to write "Stella Bella's Barnyard Adventures" for kids

By Vera Kochan



Photo Vera Kochan

Author Cynthia Brian and her "Stella Bella's Barnyard Adventures" picture book series.

Readers of this newspaper know Cynthia Brian as the Goddess Gardener. Most recently her

organization, Be the Star You Are!, a 501(c)(3), won honors as Moraga's Nonprofit of the Year for

its efforts to empower at-risk youth through literacy and positive media. Besides her many talents as a producer, interior designer, radio host, and more, she has authored 11 books. Three of those are based on true, personal stories told within her series of children's picture books, "Stella Bella's Barnyard Adventures". She chose the barnyard owner's name, Stella Bella, which means beautiful star in Italian, as a nod to her charity.

Brian grew up in Napa, California where her parents and grandparents owned a farm. "They raised all kinds of animals, so I have been raising animals since I was born," she explained. "Dad would come home with abandoned baby animals that I would nurture as a kid and nurse them back to health -- all of the animals were rescued. I'm like an animal whisperer. I also raised chickens and sold their eggs to help pay for col-

lege."

Now a Lamorinda resident, Brian keeps a menagerie on her own property. "Every time I lectured, I always talked about my animals, and people came up to me and asked if I had written children's books."

It wasn't until Brian's first grandchild and COVID's isolation came along that she was inspired to write her initial picture book, "No Barnyard Bullies." The story is based on her experience when she accepted a pampered piglet into the fold of her multi-animal sanctuary. Acting like she was queen of the barnyard, the piglet chose to bully the other animals, with a particular focus on a three-legged goat. Only a small bunny was able to stand up to the bullying piglet, who eventually realized that being accepted as "one of the family" was a lot more fun.

Brian's second book, "Family Forever," is based on the finding of a

helpless newborn animal that no one could identify until it eventually grew a squirrel's tail. Not having a mother squirrel to teach it what should come naturally, Stella Bella decided to dress in a thick, long, green robe in the hopes of emulating a tree to help the squirrel learn to climb. Over time, the squirrel found a mate and left the barnyard, but the other animals knew that "family is forever".

"Oh Deer!", Brian's newest release, revolves around an orphaned, injured fawn who was nursed back to health by Stella Bella and her children. As the fawn grew she developed a super power -- the ability to read. Bambina, as she was named, read books to the other barnyard animals and taught them how to read as well. Messages of encouragement, love, and kindness were always a part of the lessons, echoing the sentiment of her "Be the Star You Are!" books.

"These books are based on true stories, except that animals don't talk," stated Brian, "but I hope that this will help to make people better humans. It's easier to teach a lesson through animals. I want my books to be lessons for learning about love, inclusivity, and diversity. They are topical for today's times. I also hope that the parents who read these to their kids will learn a lesson. The purpose of my books is also about getting kids to read."

Brian welcomes the opportunity for classroom or library readings and notes that the proceeds from book sales benefit her Be the Star You Are! nonprofit. "I am blessed and grateful that I grew up on a farm surrounded by nature and lots of diverse critters that taught me how to be a better human."

For more information visit: www.CynthiaBrian.com.

Butterfly Parade at Moraga's Donald Rheem Elementary school

Donald Rheem Elementary School in Moraga celebrated its 50th annual Butterfly Parade on Thursday, May 9. The colorful parade has been a tradition for Rheem kindergarteners

since 1974. This year the school has 68 kindergarten students, under teachers Amanda Lorie, Cathy Kathan, and Tatiana Gessling. —S. O'Doherty



Lafayette City Council gives out eight green awards

Submitted by Nancy Hu



Lafayette City Council members with award recipients

Photo provided

On April 22, the Lafayette City Council awarded eight Green Awards (Environmental Awards of Excellence) at their City Council meeting.

1) Chuck Silva – This Lafayette resident designed and installed a home gray water system after a recent remodel of his home. All the water from his washer, four bathroom vanities, bar sink, and showers is filtered, collected, stored, pumped, and distributed via a drip irrigation system to his backyard landscape. Gray water is the primary source of landscape irrigation, while the normal water supply is used as auxiliary. As he refines his model, he plans to share

and replicate his efforts with others, during their major remodels and new construction.

2) Assistance League Diablo Valley Thrift Shop – Established in 1978, this Lafayette business has been reusing and recycling thousands of items throughout the year, keeping them out of the landfill while giving them new life, and inspiring others to do the same. In 2023, 92,000 items were sold. Packaging materials are reused.; wire clothes hangers are donated to local dry cleaning businesses. Donations not chosen for sale are repurposed, or sometimes donated to other organizations. Their youth

auxiliary Assisteens is a group of 60 young people ages 12-18 who volunteer in the thrift shop. Since 1991, Assistance League Thrift Shop has published a Thrift Shop Trail Guide, helping customers find other thrift stores in the area.

3) Mighty Market – This Lafayette business is a refill apothecary and sustainable goods brick and mortar store, which helps to reduce single use container waste. They offer refills of home care and body products at affordable prices. Since 2020, Mighty Market has helped to divert 174,080 single use containers from the landfill. They provide quality ingredients, sustainable prod-

ucts, and continue social outreach on green initiatives.

4) Mary Laska – A former Lafayette student at Acalanes, Mary championed environmental stewardship by implementing school-wide programs for garbage classification. She held highly-attended informative seminars at both Acalanes and the Lafayette public library, educating students and the community on actions they could take to reduce their environmental impacts, and even directed and premiered a 32-minute climate change film featuring many of her classmates, entitled, "Be the Change." Her outreach has centered around topics such as carpooling and water conservation, refrigerants and e-waste, trash sorting and hazardous waste, and food waste and diet.

5) Buy Nothing Project – A Lafayette community organization started by Nancy Hu in 2018, who currently runs it with co-admin Christina Goddard. In 2022, a second Buy Nothing Lafayette, CA 2.0 was started and is managed by co-admins Jen Bhadra, Alphonsine

Viry, and Carly Anne. The Buy Nothing Project, started in 2013 in Washington, is centered around fostering community connections through Asks, Gifts, and Expressions of Gratitude. Everything is free, as no monetary transactions are involved. Neighbors have been able to reduce their waste by reusing, borrowing, repurposing, and thoughtfully regifting their household items. Some members who have moved away have shared that they have started Buy Nothing groups in their new communities where Buy Nothing did not previously exist.

6) Elizabeth Dietsch – This Lafayette resident championed the zero waste annual family picnic for the Springhill Valley Homeowners Association, hosting 264 homeowners and 1000+ residents in October 2023. Elizabeth encouraged attendees to bring their own reusable water bottles, provided Boy Scout reusable dishes and serving plates, reusable utensils, and set up multiple recycle and compost receptacles throughout the site. Be-

cause of Elizabeth's advocacy, all subsequent events will be Green.

7) Contra Costa Fruit Rescue – A community organization run by Lafayette resident Pat Schultz, Contra Costa Fruit Rescue (formerly Urban Farmers) harvests fruit that would otherwise go to waste and upcycles it to those who can use and consume it, such as White Pony Express. Having started harvesting in January 2023, they have collected in total 60,000+ lbs of fruit, and diverted 7,355 lbs of fruit out of the waste stream in Lafayette, mostly coming from 42 Lafayette owners and the Lafayette Reservoir. Besides reducing food waste, they have participated in community outreach events to educate area residents and businesses on food waste, food insecurity, and food justice issues. They partner with community organizations such as Sustainable Lafayette, Lafayette Community Garden, Sustainable Contra Costa, and RecycleSmart to promote their free program, so that they can further reduce waste and feed more people.