

# Cultivating community & growing gratitude across generations

By Sharon K. Sobotta

The Lafayette Community Garden is a place that grows far more than seasonal produce. It's a space that with the help of Janet Thomas and a team of volunteers, also cultivates intergenerational learning, community, connection and gratitude where folks from all ages and stages of life have gathered this year to gaze up and wish upon stars or (for local third-graders) to get into the dirt and try their hand at the traditions of the Miwok people, the original inhabitants of the land Lamorindans now occupy.

When Monica Dikova, a senior at Acalanes High School, began exploring what she could do to earn her Girl Scout gold award and help the community she lived in, she turned toward the elders at the community garden. "My mom and I approached the women working the garden to see what projects we might be able to help with. We noticed that

the Miwok dwelling (model) was getting pretty beat up (from the elements), so we offered to build a little village."

With the help of her mother, Dikova began constructing the dwelling out of willow branches in 2021, making them pliable and bending them into the cone-shaped structure, and bringing it to full fruition in 2023.

She was onsite working alongside elders, helping third-graders from Lafayette Elementary School learn about some of the Miwok ways of life earlier this fall as she described her project. "I did this same thing (by visiting this place) when I was in elementary school. I knew it was really important. I had lots of conversations with the elders while I was working on this and learned a lot along the way," Dikova said. "One of the most important things I learned is to appreciate and make sure that you're offering



Family members enjoy stargazing at the Lafayette Community Garden



Photos Sharon K. Sobotta

Monica Dikova, who updated the Miwok exhibit at the community garden with her mom, Desi

blessings and gratitude for whatever nature offers you."

Desi Dikova, Monica's mother and Girl Scout troop leader, beamed with pride as she described the process of working alongside her daughter and the mostly retired volunteer garden tenders.

"We learned that back in the day people counted on nature to help them no matter how difficult their lives were or what challenges they faced. We learned to be grateful. When we were building an authentic new dwelling here at the garden exhibit, we kept thanking the trees for giving us branches, the land for giving us trees, the sun for giving us light," Desi Dikova explained. "There was a time when there was a deer circling the dwelling and a snake guarding it from mice. All these things really stuck together in a way that was beyond a practical level. It made me appreciate this place not only as a site for learning and gardening, but as a spiritual place."

"Teenagers can sometimes get very disconnected from other generations," Desi Dikova added. "I love that this project brought people from different ages together. Most of the gardeners are elders. If the younger generation doesn't

step up to help, how will the traditions be carried forward to future generations?"

Astronomer Isabel Hawkins stood in the middle of about three dozen Lamorindans at the garden on a dark night lit only by the glimmers of stars and the glow of the moon in anticipation of the solar eclipse earlier this fall. After pointing out multiple constellations, Hawkins reminded folks to simultaneously stay connected with the earth while remembering to also look up, gaze, admire and wish upon stars. "The best way to protect the Earth is to touch it. That's why the community garden is the best place in Lafayette," Hawkins said. "I'm so proud to be invited here to remind us that we're not just looking down but we're looking up to be good citizens of the planet. The fact that we have this garden for children to learn where their food comes from is a gift."

Seven-year-old aspiring astrophysicist Evelyn attended the event with her grandma and was starstruck by her experience. "It's amazing," Evelyn says as she tilted her head

back to study the sky. "I learned that consolations may be different things to different people because we can use our imagination."

Evelyn's grandmother, Mary, was pleasantly surprised by how engaged Evelyn was with the late stargazing event. "It is great to be here at night and to have these experts come in and teach us about the universe. Now that we know about the solar eclipse, Evelyn and I will have a grandma/granddaughter watch date," Mary said ahead of the lunar eclipse.

The curator of these events and experiences is the Garden Director Janet Thomas. "I just think now more than ever in our culture, in our time in history, we need grounding to get us back to values that are important to nourish our souls, to nourish our planet, to remind us of the natural rhythms that are important," Thomas said in a previous interview. "I think one has a better respect and enthusiasm about helping the environment if they've had exposure and that's part of our mission. The sense of community that is fostered here is really important."

For information about the Lafayette Community Garden, visit <https://lafayettecommunitygarden.org/>



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