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Two Lamorinda Women Honored at 'Women of the Year Celebration'

By Sophie Braccini



From left: Valarie Burgess, Nancy Skinner and Katie Ricklefs Photo Clayton J. Mitchell Photography

Two Lamorinda women were honored at Assemblymember Nancy Skinner's third AD14 (Assembly District 14) Women of the Year Celebration dinner on March 8 - a particularly adequate date since it was also International Women's Day. Lafayette resident Katie Ricklefs and Moraga resident Valarie Burgess were two of 15 women and organizations honored at this event.

Each year, Skinner asks for nominations of women who give to the community and apply their uncommon skills to further a cause. Burgess and Ricklefs are both passionate for the cause of women, and both say that while they've worked extremely hard as volunteers, they have received even more from what they've accomplished and from the people they've worked with.

Valarie Burgess raised three girls in Asia for 10 years (where her husband's job took them) before settling in Moraga. While in Asia she was confronted with the social challenges her girls met, particularly in middle school.

"One of my daughters had psychosomatic symptoms in eighth grade that were very disruptive," she recalled.

"Talking to parents about what was going on in the class, I

felt they weren't able to handle the situations any better than their daughters, and that we were perpetuating the same behaviors through generations."

Burgess joined the American Association of University Women (AAUW) upon her return to the States, and became very interested when the Association conducted a national study in 1992 that focused on how schools shortchanged girls, and a study the next year about harassment and how it affected girls' ability to study and do well.

In 1997, AAUW organized a first Sister-to-Sister summit, a day for girls to find their voice and their power. Burgess began a mission to start such a program in Lamorinda. It took three years to find the right people. Sandy Mougeot was the first to chair the program. Burgess took charge three years later.

The leadership program for girls is now in its 13th year and continues to evolve. "This year, in addition to the high school girls that we train in the span of six months with the life skills to become facilitators, Sister-to-Sister includes a group of middle-school girls who will not only participate in the summit, but prepare it," said Burgess. "Most girls go through a loss of self-confidence in middle-school. Our objective is to help them discover that they have the inner power to regain it, a skill that they can use all their life."

Lafayette's Katie Ricklefs was honored for a different type of volunteering, but one that aims at empowering women as well. For many years Ricklefs has served on the Board of the Shasta Pacific Planned Parenthood that she now chairs. An administrator for Kaiser for 27 years, Ricklefs continues to be a leader and a community builder in the area of health care.

"Planned Parenthood is made of 80 independent affiliates all over the country," she explained. "Ours is the fourth largest in the country. It covers 17 Northern California counties."

She is now on her ninth year on the Board and was asked to stay longer than the customary six as the organization went through a major expansion when it incorporated the San Francisco/Marin affiliate that went bankrupt.

"It was a very smooth transition," recalled Ricklefs. "We had our first San Francisco center opened within one weekend."

Ricklefs moved to Lafayette in 1992 with her family after they lost their Montclair home in the Oakland fire, and became involved with Acalanes High School where her daughter studied. She says that today the closest Planned Parenthood center to Lamorinda is in Walnut Creek and that there has been some level of cooperation to bring educational programs to local schools.

"Most of the time, the teens get their information via their phones or the Internet," said Ricklefs. "Planned Parenthood gets thousand of hits on its website and any questions always get a response." Ricklefs also volunteers with the Lamorinda Democratic Club, and she is a California Democratic Party Delegate.

According to Skinner, Ricklefs and Burgess are two of 15 extraordinary women (and organizations) that are "strengthening our communities and increasing opportunities for women."

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