

A Transportation GEM: Going Electric in Lamorinda

By Cathy Dausman



Orinda residents Justin Joss, 15, and driver Jason, 17, enjoy a moment in their family's GEM. Photos Cathy Dausman

Jon and Allison Joss of Orinda have four sons and three cars, but they still have a handle on their gas and auto insurance bills thanks to a GEM, or Global Electric Motorcar. "I would estimate we save about \$500 to \$1,000 a year when we insure our three teenagers using a GEM as their primary car," Allison said. A GEM looks as if it belongs on the golf course. In fact, it does belong on the golf course, but it is also fully street legal.

In accordance with 1998 National Highway Traffic Safety Administration rules, the car is equipped with

headlamps, tail lamps, stop lamps, reflectors, mirrors, a parking brake, a windshield, and seat belts.

Jon Joss golfs, so his GEM includes an after-market golf rack. Allison Joss chose the color red when she and her husband bought the two-speed model E-4 in 2007 from a now-defunct Martinez Chrysler dealer. Their oldest son, Alex, was 15 when his parents bought the car five years ago, and he found it "embarrassing." Younger siblings Andy, now 19, and Jason, 17, thought the GEM was cool. It seats four and its new "souped-up" battery allows what son Jason calls an

"exhilarating top speed" of 30 to 35 mph, depending on terrain. The car gets 20 to 40 miles on a single overnight charge and has 5,000 miles on its odometer.

"That's pretty good," said Kregg Williams, owner of California Speed Sports in Livermore. "Considering the average driver puts just five miles on the car in a day, it takes a while to get that mileage."

Williams said Chrysler built the first GEM cars 10 years ago as a "gas credit" to offset their production of larger, gas-guzzling automobiles. They sold only 50,000 units nation-

wide. Then Polaris bought the GEM division, and Williams sees almost limitless potential for the Low Speed, or Neighborhood Electric Vehicle. He says they're perfect for campuses, apartment complexes, parking structures and gated communities. "Livermore Labs has lots of GEM cars, as does Stanford University," he said. Brother Dominic Berardelli of Saint Mary's College drives a Ford Think electric cart. He began using his personally-named "BroMobile" seven or eight years ago when he had difficulty walking across campus. Trinka Courtemanche, campus workflow coordinator, says the college owns a second Think and six other carts made by EZ Go.

Orinda Country Club has the Precedent by Club Car for use only on its golf course. Moraga Country Club members drive carts made by

Yamaha.

Rossmoor has a rental fleet of 30, also Yamaha-made, said Director of Golf Mark Heptig. Some Rossmoor residents drive their own privately owned low speed vehicles within Rossmoor, said Communications Manager Maureen O'Rourke.

If there is a down side to owning a GEM, Jon Joss said it means they have to park another car outside. "The soft side doors are fairly easy to take on and off, but if they were easier, that would be a huge plus."

And Jason's friends sometimes "relocated" the GEM when he drove it to baseball practice. Yet even without a heated cab and minus power steering the GEM is the Joss family go-to car for running local errands. Justin, 15, the youngest, doesn't have his license, but knows he too will drive the GEM.



Brother Dominic Berardelli drives a Ford Think, nicknamed the "Bro-Mobile"

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Creating Community through Conversations in French and Italian

By Laurie Snyder



Nicole Collins teaches exclusively at the Orinda Community Center. From left: Jerry Merrill, Gerry Azaro, Nicole Collins, and Margaret Mahoney.

Nicole Collins is a gardener – but not in the sense one usually imagines. Collins is a gardener of dreams.

A native French and Italian speaker, she was born in Milan and moved with her family to France when she was 14. Eventually, she met her husband – a Californian – and moved to Orinda in the early 1990s. While raising her daughter, she began building her reputation as one of the most rare of teachers – one who is able to coax students out of their shells to not only enjoy the sub-

jects they are studying, but to try things they thought were impossible.

Collins, who holds a degree in comparative literature, has been presenting conversation classes at the Orinda Community Center since her earliest Lamorinda days. So beloved by her students, she now teaches beginning through advanced level Italian and French year round. "My mission is to create a friendly and relaxed experience for people to learn or brush-up on French or Italian, the way these languages are spoken today," she says. Fall, winter, and spring sessions are 10 to 12 weeks long; summer sessions, five to six weeks.

Many of her pupils come from as far away as Marin; others are from Berkeley, Danville, and Rossmoor. "At the moment, I have three language teachers in my class," she says. Physicians and opera buffs are also big enrollees; still others are professionals hoping to develop Italian or French skills to help them succeed in the corporate world, or native French and Italian speakers wanting to maintain their language skills while living among their English-speaking neighbors.

"Basically, my class is a brain gym," she says. Participants "just want to keep their brains elastic and ready to go." Her oldest student is 89.

Her classes are also very popular with travelers. Having the skills to get out of hotel rooms to interact with new people, catch a train, hop on a bus at the spur of the moment, or even just sit in a quiet café in a quaint town somewhere soaking up the atmosphere while bantering with local residents has helped learners like pro-

fessional photographer Ohlen Alexander to become even more outgoing than usual.

Several have told Collins, "This has been on my bucket list." While researching family histories, others have met cousins, forming new bonds that only a common language can provide. Collins will even help students interested in genealogy to help translate census records, old letters, and other documents uncovered in their research.

Small study groups form, classmates get together at the coffee shop below the Orinda Library, friends are made. Says Bobby Deibert, "The French IV class with Nicole Collins is the highlight of my week. We have a wonderful group of very interesting people and Nicole is a great and talented professor."

"It's become a little community," says Collins. "We have movie nights." They even organize potluck dinners and holiday parties at each other's homes. "A lot of my students come back year after year – so I have to make it fun for them. It keeps me on my toes – it keeps my lessons fresh."

Collins and her students also keep in touch via email and Facebook. No textbook purchase is required. Best of all, there are no grades or tests – just a little bit of friendly competition between study buddies. Although she hopes for fluency from her students, Collins realizes that this is not always the goal for the participants in her classes. "All it takes is to have just a little bit of a language," she says.

New sessions start in January. For details, visit www.nicolelan-guage.com.