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In Focus: Jim Marggraff

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Jim Marggraff Photo provided

This year one of the judges at the prestigious EY's Entrepreneur Of The Year Awards program will be Lafayette resident Jim Marggraff.

The awards program, now in its 31st year, seeks entrepreneurial and innovative leaders who will be shaping the future through their vision. The program gives nominees the chance to compete at a regional level and go on to national and global levels. The northern California program is one of more than 145 cities in more than 60 countries.

Every year the awards feature an independent panel of judges selected from both prior award winners and prominent industry leaders. Marggraff is no exception, having won the Northern California EY Entrepreneur Of The Year award himself in 2011. He is in good company – other winners from the area include Starbucks Coffee Company, LinkedIn, FitBit, Google, GoPro, Earthbound Farm, Stella & Dot, Medivation and Shutterfly.

Marggraff, whose innovations have long been covered by the media including the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, CNN, Good Morning America and Business Week among many more, has been developing technology and products to create solutions and improve learning for over 25 years.

From 1999-2010 Marggraff received hundreds of awards from around the world, most notably with his company, LeapFrog, for LeapPads – his educational toy, which earned the Toy of the Year award. It was during his seven years at LeapFrog that he developed his idea for a smartpen and went on to found Livescribe.

Never one to let the grass grow under his feet, Marggraff founded Eyefluence in 2013, developing technology that transforms intent into action through the user's eyes. He sold Eyefluence in 2016 to Google and is now a Director of Product Management at Google.

Marggraff says that the Entrepreneur Of The Year award recognizes those who demonstrate excellent and extraordinary success in areas such as financial performance, innovation and commitment to their businesses and communities is what makes it the world's most prestigious business award for entrepreneurship.

He continues, "We are looking for entrepreneurs who demonstrate business savvy, financial acumen, leadership, high integrity, and evidence of success — and who will become the role models of future entrepreneurs."

He notes that the superb pool of nominees provides his biggest challenge and says that he has to merge insights from his own experience with guidance for the attributes specified by EY to select the most outstanding entrepreneurs. "I am impressed by the overall quality and range of businesses represented by the nominees."

Clearly a true entrepreneur has an exceptional drive to succeed. When asked if he sought to invent and create as a child, Marggraff replied that, as a child of a single parent with no college education, he was driven to find ways to augment the family income by delivering newspapers, selling Christmas cards and seeds and hosting neighborhood raffles but he says, "I enjoyed creating media – recording and splicing sounds and interviews, electronics and programming on a clunky teletype with paper tape."

Longtime Lafayette residents

Marggraff and his wife have lived in Lafayette since 1998. They have two children, both of whom went through Acalanes High School. Their son, Blake, now 24, has just started his second company, EPharmix, and their daughter, Annie, attends Washington University in St. Louis.

He and his wife have encouraged their children through their actions and by engaging them in their own activities wherever possible. Marggraff says that both children visited LeapFrog weekly for years while he worked there to record their voices for characters in the LeapPad Learning System.

Their encouragement worked. In his senior year of high school Blake won the Intel International Science and Engineering Fair Gordon E. Moore award for a breakthrough treatment for cancer with his classmate Matt Feddersen.

Annie, after much research, set up a running club during high school for autistic students, a program that led to "Bear Cubs" running club for autistic students at Washington University – a program she is

currently working on taking nationwide.

However, Marggraff also credits local schools, which he said encouraged his children too. He particularly credits Acalanes science teacher Jay Chugh who he said "cleared a path for them (Blake and Matt) to explore and invent – and represent Lamorinda on a global stage."

Marggraf continues, "Schools are only as good as the support of their parents and communities. I have met with and supported principals and teachers of many of our Lamorinda schools for discussions about the LeapPad and the Livescribe smartpen (that I had created). The energy, enthusiasm, and commitment of the staff with whom I have met, to our students' future, are extraordinary."

Marggraff is a member of the Lamorinda Sunrise Rotary Club. He and his entire family have spoken on multiple occasions sharing their passions, projects and developments. He loves the extraordinarily positive community support in Lafayette. "People in our community step up to challenges and opportunities, both local or global."

Explaining what inspires him he says, "I am energized by developing a breakthrough technology to meet a critical need for our society and then building a team and solution that will positively impact the world."

The Entrepreneur Of The Year Awards nominees are arguably already winners, gaining as they surely will from the perspective and wisdom of Marggraff's involvement.

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[back](#)

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