# Omorinda OTR HOMES

Lamorinda Weekly Volume 11 Issue 18 Wednesday, Nov. 1, 2017



## Building a house of straw

By John T. Miller



Amber and Norman Remer smile inside their house of straw, while under construction.

Photo John T. Miller

hile Norman and Amber Remer of Saranap are feeling no threats from the Big Bad Wolf, their efforts to build a house of straw have been beset by many obstacles, including county permits, the recent winter monsoons, concerns of neighbors, and the stress of time and space constraints.

When the Remers moved back to the Bay Area after spending five years in Washington, D.C., they

realized they could not afford to live in the community of their choice on the teacher salaries they both earn. Norman is a high school English teacher and Amber teaches elementary school. The couple are also expecting their first child in January.

Norman's creative solution was to call on Mom and Dad – Lilli and Nick Remer – who were willing to take out a loan on their existing home and transfer the mortgage payments to their son and daugh-

ter-in-law so they could build a living quarters in their backyard.

They first began planning in July, 2015.

"We realized we could take advantage of this amazing opportunity to build something unique, beautiful and eco-friendly," said Norman Remer. "I researched adobe structures but realized it wouldn't work in earthquake country. My research led me to straw bale construction and I fell in love with the soft curves and undulating walls of the design. Luckily, Amber was willing to go along with my crazy scheme."

Straw bale homes have thick walls like adobe, are insulated with an agricultural waste product, and are perfectly suited to California's earthquakes and hot summers. Once the tightly packed bales are enclosed, there is no room for oxygen, rendering the house practically fireproof.

An advantage to the straw insulation is efficiency in heating and cooling. Amber Remer points out, "It takes 12 hours for changes in outside temperature to reach the inside. The house stays cool without air conditioning even on 100-degree days." The house can also support a green roof, with over 500 square feet of potential garden outside the upstairs bedroom window.

"When we first went in for the permitting process, the county officials were like deer in headlights with the concept of a building with straw walls," said Norman Remer. "Despite the fact that people have built like this for hundreds of years, the county wasn't sure how to deal with it. They worried that the house might collapse."

... continued on page D4



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## Lamorinda Home Sales recorded

City	Last reported:	LOWEST AMOUNT:	HIGHEST AMOUNT:
LAFAYETTE	11	\$794,000	\$2,665,000
MORAGA	9	\$443,500	\$1,900,000
ORINDA	10	\$750,000	\$2,970,000

Home sales are compiled by Cal REsource, an Oakland real estate information company. Sale prices are computed from the county transfer tax information shown on the deeds that record at close of escrow and are published five to eight weeks after such recording. This information is obtained from public county records and is provided to us by California REsource. Neither Cal REsource nor this publication are liable for errors or omissions.

#### **LAFAYETTE**

866 Birdhaven Court, \$1,426,000, 3 Bdrms, 1669 SqFt, 1949 YrBlt, 10-9-17 617 Burton Drive, \$1,950,000, 5 Bdrms, 3038 SqFt, 1968 YrBlt, 10-6-17; Previous Sale: \$252,500, 06-23-80

1670 Foothill Park Circle, \$1,167,000, 5 Bdrms, 2596 SqFt, 1959 YrBlt, 9-29-17; Previous Sale: \$250,000, 08-07-87

561 Francis Drive, \$794,000, 3 Bdrms, 1548 SqFt, 1967 YrBlt, 9-27-17; Previous Sale: \$658,000, 07-16-04

3111 Gloria Terrace, \$1,199,000, 4 Bdrms, 2390 SqFt, 1965 YrBlt, 9-29-17; Previous Sale: \$905,000, 09-27-16

3486 Moraga Boulevard, \$1,100,000, 4 Bdrms, 1592 SqFt, 1941 YrBlt, 9-27-17; Previous Sale: \$275,000, 10-12-95

580 Silverado Drive, \$1,558,000, 3 Bdrms, 2088 SqFt, 1959 YrBlt, 10-6-17

3416 St. Marys Road, \$2,665,000, 5 Bdrms, 3369 SqFt, 1959 YrBlt, 9-25-17; Previous Sale: \$850,000, 04-16-13

3294 Sweet Drive, \$1,075,000, 3 Bdrms, 1278 SqFt, 1955 YrBlt, 9-29-17; Previous Sale: \$669,000, 08-29-08

1750 Toyon Road, \$864,000, 3 Bdrms, 1710 SqFt, 1978 YrBlt, 10-6-17

1106 Upper Happy Valley Road, \$2,195,000, 4 Bdrms, 2371 SqFt, 1939 YrBlt, 9-29-17; Previous Sale: \$1,680,000, 02-17-15

### **MORAGA**

867 Augusta Drive, \$850,000, 3 Bdrms, 2148 SqFt, 1979 YrBlt, 9-29-17 292 Birchwood Drive, \$1,400,000, 4 Bdrms, 2258 SqFt, 1970 YrBlt, 10-2-17;

Previous Sale: \$565,000, 12-12-95

10 Brandt Drive, \$1,608,000, 5 Bdrms, 3692 SqFt, 1985 YrBlt, 10-6-17; Previous Sale: \$893,000, 08-30-01

66 Carr Drive, \$1,349,000, 4 Bdrms, 2410 SqFt, 1977 YrBlt, 9-29-17; Previous Sale: \$805,000, 08-02-02

2145 Donald Drive #10, \$443,500, 2 Bdrms, 952 SqFt, 1964 YrBlt, 10-5-17; Previous Sale: \$393,000, 12-15-05

1157 Larch Avenue, \$975,000, 4 Bdrms, 1829 SqFt, 1963 YrBlt, 9-27-17

1722 St. Andrews Drive, \$910,000, 3 Bdrms, 2079 SqFt, 1974 YrBlt, 9-29-17; Previous Sale: \$879,100, 04-11-16

15 Tia Place, \$1,200,000, 4 Bdrms, 2121 SqFt, 1967 YrBlt, 10-6-17; Previous Sale: \$1,155,000, 10-24-06

176 Willowbrook Lane, \$1,900,000, 3 Bdrms, 3003 SqFt, 2016 YrBlt, 9-29-17

#### **ORINDA**

12 Chelton Court, \$1,350,000, 4 Bdrms, 2314 SqFt, 1962 YrBlt, 9-26-17 429 El Toyonal, \$1,425,000, 5 Bdrms, 4159 SqFt, 2008 YrBlt, 10-6-17;

Previous Sale: \$1,300,000, 06-21-12

1 Hidden Lane, \$1,435,000, 4 Bdrms, 2351 SqFt, 1968 YrBlt, 10-3-17 270 Holly Lane, \$1,275,000, 3 Bdrms, 3031 SqFt, 1981 YrBlt, 10-3-17; Previous Sale: \$675,000, 10-26-01

502 Miner Road, \$2,970,000, 5 Bdrms, 4193 SqFt, 1963 YrBlt, 9-29-17; Previous Sale: \$2,190,000, 06-08-12

129 Rheem Boulevard, \$750,000, 3 Bdrms, 1778 SqFt, 1962 YrBlt, 9-29-17

554 Tahos Road, \$2,800,000, 3 Bdrms, 1915 SqFt, 1963 YrBlt, 10-6-17; Previous Sale: \$1,340,000, 06-03-16

221 Village Gate Road, \$1,200,000, 3 Bdrms, 2130 SqFt, 1979 YrBlt, 10-6-17

33 Whitehall Drive, \$1,100,000, 3 Bdrms, 1579 SqFt, 1961 YrBlt, 10-6-17;
Previous Sale: \$793,000, 06-27-08

16 Wilder Road, \$2,247,500, 4 Bdrms, 4149 SqFt, 2016 YrBlt, 9-27-17

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## Building a house of straw

## ... continued from page D1



From left: Architect David Arkin and contractor Keith Kuhlmann at the straw house building site.

Photos provide:

In the Remer's corner, however, was architect David Arkin, AIA, who is one of the founders and current director of the California Straw Building Association. Arkin and his wife, Anni Tilt, are partners of Arkin Tilt Architects in Berkeley.

"Arkin arranged a meeting with the lead planner and engineer with the county to present the project and address any concerns and provide the extra data required by them," Norman said. In all, the research and application process took over six months.

A major obstacle was the design. Space restraints limited the structure to 1,000 square feet, and they wondered how they could design a two-story home to get a living space worth building. They were able to get a square footage calculation allowance on the thickness of the walls. The straw bales require 21 inches of thickness, whereas standard walls are only 6 inches thick. Everything else was treated like a conventional building.

They also anticipated and tried to address potential neighbors' concerns over the two-story structure by limiting the downstairs ceilings to 7.5 feet high and slanting the roof from 6 feet high upstairs.

Their first task was to dig the foundation, but the severe winter rains cost countless delays. In addition, a deluge dislodged a newly installed sump pump and a tractor submerged in a quagmire of mud took an entire day to extract.

Once the walls were erected, one of the most satisfying days was the "bale raising." Similar to the tradition of a barn raising being a community event, the Remers called on family and friends to help. Over 50 people came, including many they didn't even know as a result of calling out to the CASBA organization. Within three and a half hours, the tightly bound bales of hay were loaded into the walls and secured with wire.

Since the school year began, Norman Remer has spent weekends plastering



Local artist Evan Gerardo lends a hand.

the outside walls. He is using a lime plastering mixture, applied slowly, so it will dry properly into a protective limestone, which allows moisture to escape rather than becoming trapped within the walls. "Water is the enemy of straw-built houses and can lead to mold," he says.

While many people have helped on various parts of the project, Norman credits his childhood friend – local artist Evan Gerardo – for his constant help. "Evan is the reason I'm still alive today," he says. "He helped dig, moved lumber, and, once the plastering started he would show up regularly to give of his time and supportive energy."

At first, the couple had hopes of being able to move in before their baby is born, but Amber realized the stress of completion was getting to be too much: "My nesting urge is definitely kicking in, but I'll still be able to prepare the bedroom. We've accepted that we may not make it in time."

Looking back at the process, Norman says, "As painful and as time consuming as it's been, when I look at any particular piece of the house I can think of the person who helped me with it. I have a personal investment in every square inch of this project."



## Feng Shui

## Kitchen feng shui for the fall

By Michele Duffy



Kitchens should be clean and tidy and also flooded with lots of natural light, or at least fantastic lighting options.

Photo Michele Duffy

itchens are gathering places to create, nourish and feed ourselves, our families and our friends – but especially with fall in full swing, the kitchen shifts to being the work horse of the season.

Your kitchen should not be a downer when you are in it for a meal or even a snack. In fact, it should be where you spend your happiest moments and where you find the joy of being a family. Good food, cooking and a warm kitchen makes the house a home, so kitchen feng shui should be top of mind during this bounty of the fall harvest.

The feng shui symbology of the kitchen is unique and multilayered, revolving around increasing positive energy in the kitchen to generate household prosperity, happiness and good health. Food brings people together for nourishment, celebration and connection. Creating a bright, well-lit and welcoming kitchen with that loving vibrational will enhance the meals you create there and

amplify the health and happiness results you want.

The kitchen is associated with the fire element because the hearth of the home or stove is located there. Because the kitchen and, in particular, the stove help create nourishment that allows us to have energy to work and prosper, the kitchen and stove relate directly to the home's finances.

Good stove feng shui includes maintaining and repairing any broken burners, cleaning your stove cooktop daily and keeping it spotless, as well as using all of the burners and rotating them daily. The stove, ideally, should be placed in the "commanding" position, in the middle of a center island, if there is room, to promote being in control of one's own finances.

Many people do not realize many obvious kitchen feng shui tips; if your kitchen is at odds with this list, you might possibly need a professional to help.

... continued on page D6

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## Feng Shui

## Kitchen feng shui for the fall

## ... continued from page D5



White shows off food best in the kitchen, and the stove cook top in the island or "Commanding Position" bodes well for wealth.

- 1) Make sure you actually use your kitchen to prepare meals to show how much you want to nourish your loved ones;
- 2) For the same reason, avoid having dirty dishes on counters or in the sink overnight;
- 3) Clean and sort thoroughly inside cabinets, the counters, floors and make the kitchen sparkle;
- 4) Assess what you really use in your kitchen and remove or store appliances away from the counter that are just getting in the way of an organized working space;
- 5) Kitchens should be well lit, well ventilated, and clutter free;
- 6) The placement of the kitchen should, if possible, be toward the back of the home:
- 7) Kitchens placed in the center of the home should be avoided;
- 8) Repair any and all leaking faucets, drains and refrigerators, and fix creaky doors;
  - 9) Do not place knives on the countertops since

their "sharp" negative energy weakens the fire energy associated with the kitchen area;

- 10) Make sure the sink or refrigerator is not directly next to the stove (water puts out fire) if you desire financial abundance:
- 11) The stove should be in good working order at all times and spotless to draw more wealth and positive energy into your life;
- 12) If possible, the stove placement should be in an island configuration or in the "commanding position" to be in control of one's wealth/finances;
- 13) Microwaves should not be placed over the stove, blocking the stove's positive "Sheng" energy;
- 14) Balance out the kitchen with all five elements. Usually the four elements of Fire, Water, Metal and Earth are already present, so add a small plant or fresh flowers for the Wood element to encourage positive and balanced energy flow in the kitchen;
- 15) Choose a color that corresponds to the placement that your kitchen occupies in your home and if in doubt, white shows off the vibrancy of our food best; and
- 16) Choose artwork that reinforces health, abundance, happiness and vitality. You don't need to prepare com-

plicated meals to impress your family and friends. Use ingredients that are fresh for the most vital Chi from a farmers' market or your favorite organic grocer. Choose whole foods versus processed. Like elsewhere in your kitchen, a tiny bit of planning and preparation will go a long way toward preparing yummy nourishment for all.

Keep in mind that the feng shui health trinity of master bedroom, baths and kitchen all contribute to our overall feeling of sustainable wellness, nourishment and ease. Our kitchens can be lovingly simplified, restored and organized to be a clean and tidy space where we can create meals that sustain our busy lives. If your kitchen no longer feels organized or functional, hopefully these tips will inspire you to clean out the junk drawer, or make the coffee and tea station less cluttered, or organize the broom closet, or clean the stove. Wherever you start, notice how it begins to open up the space and notice how you feel.

If you feel like creating more space, then keep going. If you do even a few of the tips that I have shared, you might feel inspired to take back control of your kitchen so that this fall you continue to nourish and delight with food to feed the soul of the season.

Michele Duffy, BTB M.F.S. is an Orinda resident

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FAMILY	HEALTH	JOY & COMPLETION
ZHEN Wood East Green Spring	TAI JI Earth Center Orange, Yellow Brown	DUI Metal West White Autumn
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The Bagua Map: Front Door

who, since 1999, enjoys creating "Space as Medicine" Feng Shui one space at a time, as well as hiking in nature, cooking, and spending time with her family; Canyon Ranch Feng Shui Master, International Feng Shui Guild (IFSG) Red Ribbon Professional. To schedule a professional 2017 Feng Shui Consultation, contact Michele at (520) 647-4887 or send an email to spaceharmony@ gmail.com.





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## Cynthia Brian's Gardening Guide for November

## Where there is smoke...

## By Cynthia Brian

"Count the fires by glowing flames, never by the ashes that fall. Count your days by the golden hours, don't remember clouds at all. Count the nights by stars, not shadows.

Count your life by smiles, not tears.

And with joy on every day, count your age by friends, not years." Tello November! We are grateful to welcome you.

With the devastating fires of the past month throughout California, our atmosphere has been filled with smoke and ash. The air quality has been so poor that we have been warned to stay indoors or wear N-95 rated masks when walking outside. Wildfire smoke and soot irritates eyes, skin, throat, nose, and lungs, and is especially dangerous for anyone with asthma or other respiratory illnesses.

But what effect does the smoke and debris have on our gardens?

Surprisingly, healthy plants have the ability to absorb the dangerous carbon dioxide and turn it into oxygen. Some landscapes may actually benefit from smoke as it diffuses the light allowing the shadows to be less intense under the top leaves of plants. The lower leaves then produce more food for the plant. Plants use carbon dioxide as a fertilizer, cleaning the chemicals and toxic particles in the air while restoring and cleansing our atmosphere.

Houseplants are extremely beneficial in cleaning our indoor air quality. They have the ability to reduce the effects of mold, dust, microbes, and volatile organic compounds. Spider plants, pothos, snake plant, spathiphyllum, philodendron, palms, and ficus benjamina are all easy to grow and work overtime to keep us breathing clean, fresh air.

Scientists are discovering the dire consequences of climate change not only on our physical wellbeing, but on our mental fitness as well. Disasters such as the catastrophic hurricanes, floods, earthquakes and fires have a dramatic negative impact on our health. We can help the environment as well as our families by maintaining a positive outlook and putting a smile on our face while we work together diligently to reduce our carbon footprint. ... continued on next page



Fall arrangement of clivia, roses and euphorbia.



Getting ready for Thanksgiving, a garden of pumpkins.





Grapevines will be dropping leaves soon.



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## Cynthia Brian's Gardening Guide for November



Harvest cauliflower and beets.

Want to protect your valuable plants from any negative effects from the smoke? Here are a few simple tasks to undertake.

- 1. Any vegetable or fruit still in the orchard or garden needs to be washed thoroughly before consuming. A solution of vinegar and water is a time-tested cleanser.
- 2. Compost any damaged bush, flower, fruit or vegetable.
- 3. Spray your plants with a hose to remove any clogged particles. Continue to do this until you see a difference.
- 4. Fertilize the landscape now, including your grass and lawn.
- 5. Add three inches of mulch to your garden, if you didn't already do it last month.
- 6. Any bare earth needs a cover crop. Clover, alfalfa, wildflowers, fava beans, vetch and mustard will add nitrogen to the soil.
- 7. Remove any dead or dying trees or shrubs. When planting new trees, space them at least 10 feet apart.
- 8. Be fire-wise by clearing your roof, gutters, eaves, decks and patios of debris.
- 9. Mow your lawns and keep them green. Lawns clean the air we breathe, absorb smoke and pollutants, and change sulfur dioxide and carbon dioxide into oxygen. A swath of green offers a healthy filtration system while being a flame-retardant safety zone.

Make fire prevention a top priority by creating a defensible space around your home and garden. Fires burn only when fuel is present and a dry landscape is fuel for the fire.

## Other Tips for your November To-Do List:

- WINTERIZE your garden. Cover frost prone plants and shrubs with blankets
  or burlap. Wash patio furniture before storing or covering. Move fragile container plants under an eave or away from harsh winds.
- **PRUNE** your fruit trees and crape myrtles once all the leaves have fallen. Keep branches a minimum of six feet from the ground.
- RAKE leaves to add to the compost pile. It is especially important to rake redwood and pine needles as they tend to blanket an area suffocating any other living things.
- **PLANT** bulbs for spring blooms. (You have been refrigerating your tulips and crocuses, right?)
- **CLEAN** gutters of all debris to prevent clogging when the rains come.
- **SOW** lawn seed and keep the seed watered until it sprouts.
- **PICK** guavas and bananas as they ripen.
- WAIT another month before harvesting persimmons. If you are having
  problems with the birds and squirrels eating your unripe fruit, pick early and
  refrigerate.
   ... continued on page D10



A white mandevilla invokes serenity.



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## Cynthia Brian's Gardening Guide for November

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- **PLANT** garlic and shallots before the weather turns cold. Easy to grow, they will overwinter to supply you with big savory bulbs for a summer harvest.
- **ARRANGE** roses, clivia, euphorbia and branches for a beautiful fall display.
- **GROW** chrysanthemums. These long blooming flowers are available in a variety of colors and textures adding a smile to any visitor.
- **PROVIDE** food and water for the birds, especially since many are migrating.
- HARVEST cruciferous vegetables including cauliflower, broccoli, kale, carrots
  beets, Swiss chard, Brussels sprouts as well as arugula and nasturtiums for your
  healthy meals. These foods are high in antioxidants, which support the body's
  ability to fight off toxins and reduce chronic inflammation.
- AERATE your lawns. For more information on grass selections and the benefits
  of planting grass, see https://www.lamorindaweekly.com/archive/issue1117/
  Digging-Deep-with-Cynthia-Brian-The-grass-is-always-greener.html
- **MARVEL** at the changing colors of the leaves on trees, specifically Japanese maple, pistache, liquid amber and crape myrtle.
- CHECK out the glorious bark of a eucalyptus tree.
- **CUT** a few branches from grapevines to use as table décor for an autumn gathering.
- **BRING** houseplants outside for a shower and day in the cooler sunshine. They'll be ready for a winter of air freshening back inside.
- **ADD** a peaceful, quiet element to a container by planting a white mandevilla. If you protect it from frost, you'll get an annual display of florets.
- PACK "To Go emergency bags" and keep one in your home and in your car. In case of a disaster, every second counts.
- **TAKE** a break and head to the beach. The sea air will refresh and reawaken your joyful spirit. (It works every time for me!)
- **GET** ready for Thanksgiving with a garden display of mixed pumpkins, gourds, and scarecrows.

Gratitude is the theme for November. The days are short. The soil is warm and we all pray for rain. Our thoughts and prayers go to all of those who have suffered in the recent natural disasters. It's been a challenging few months for our country and our world, yet despite the tragedies, let us all count our blessings and keep on smiling.



The architecture of the live oak invites tree climbers and awe.



Deer resistant and hardy, purple Russian sage adds pizzazz to any garden.

Photos Cynthia Brian

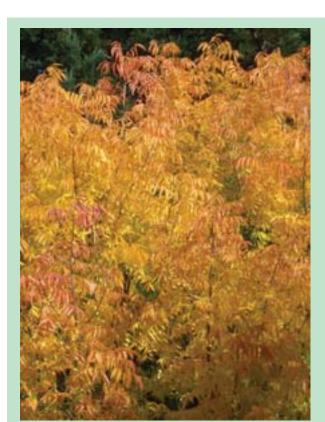


Peach hued Angel Trumpet Vine and delicious.



Banana trees offer privacy and delicious fruit





Vibrant colors of the pistache change with the autumn coolness.



Cynthia Brian takes a sea break and encourages everyone to keep on

Cynthia Brian, The Goddess Gardener, raised in the vineyards of Napa County, is a New York Times best selling author, actor, radio personality, speaker, media and writing coach as well as the Founder and Executive Director of Be the Star You Are 1° 501 c3. Please make a donation to help with hurricane & fire disaster relief at www.BetheStarYouAre.org. Tune into Cynthia's Radio show and order her books at www.StarStyleRadio.com.







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## **18 Charles Hill Circle**

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\$3,795,000



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Premium views of hills, valley & sunsets. Beautifully updated & maintained. Great location & Top Schools!

\$1,225,000



#### 5 Lisa Lane,

Beautiful Sanders Ranch estate with rolling hill views is an entertainers dream. Level backward, pool & sports court.

\$1,775,000



## 961 Oak View Circle

Complete fixer with approved plans for Beautiful Craftsman Style home in amazing location.

\$1,290,000



#### 18 Toledo Court

Happy Valley neighborhood, .94 acre with level yard. Walls of glass, kitchen opens to family room. Bonus room.

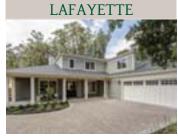
\$1,875,000



#### 1200 Glen Road

Fabulous location & views! Multigen living close to town/BART. 5bd +library +bonus room +full apartment attached.

\$2,099,000



## 1601 Reliez Valley Road

Breathtaking new custom by SpringHill Homes boasts 5bd/4.5ba, 4323sf of incredible living spaces on scenic 1.23acres.

\$3,650,000



## 4015 Happy Valley Road

Elegant French Country home in prestigious Happy Valley. Classic 2 story, apx. 6,011 sq.ft., 5 beds/5.5 baths on flat .97 acre lot.

\$4,895,000

## The Village Associates:

Ashley Battersby Patricia Battersby Shannon Conner Meara Dunsmore Linda Ehrich Joan Evans Linda S. Friedman Dexter Honens II Anne Knight Susan Zeh Layng Charles Levine Darrick Martin Erin Martin April Matthews Hillary Murphy Karen Murphy John Nash Ben Olsen Sue Olsen Tara Rochlin Jaime Roder Altie Schmitt Judy Schoenrock Ann Sharf Amy Rose Smith Molly Smith Jeff Snell Lynda Snell Steve Stahle Clark Thompson Angie Evans Traxinger



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