

Workin' on the (transcontinental) railroad – history comes alive in St. P's new community center



Photos provided



By Pippa Fisher

The brand new St. Perpetua Community Center is hosting a unique, free presentation to mark the 150th anniversary of the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad. Highly accomplished and awarded engineer and public speaker, not to mention former Lafayette resident, Paul Giroux will be giving his presentation at 3 p.m. on Sunday, May 5.

In a written description of his presentation Giroux describes the significance of the engineering feat. "The Transcontinental Railway, completed in May 1869 is an important chapter not only in civil engineering but in the history of the United States."

Giroux's presentation will cover the challenges of building the Transcontinental Railroad, means and methods used in building it, the contributions it offered the civil engineering profession and its importance to growth and development in the U.S.

For four decades Giroux

has worked with Kiewit Corporation on a wide variety of notable heavy civil engineering projects including the new Bay Bridge. He has presented more than 200 lectures, both in the U.S. and internationally, and has won many awards. He was inducted into the Iowa State University Construction Engineering Hall of Fame in 2018.

Giroux explains, "Seeking opportunity, adventurous Americans began migrating to the west coast of North America in the first half of the 19th century. With the first wagon trains of settlers leaving Independence, Missouri in 1836 they would embark on an arduous five-month journey." Giroux explains how interest in safe and speedy passage to the Pacific Coast grew, and with the discovery of gold in California at Sutter's Mill east of Sacramento in 1848, California became the 31st state admitted into the Union in 1850.

Giroux continues, "Exploratory surveys would need to be performed to find a feasible route through a terrain

many said was impossible to cross. Even as the United States was embroiled in a Civil War (1861-1865), Abraham Lincoln had the courage to start building a transcontinental railroad that would help unite all of America in 1862. There would be two mighty forces; the Central Pacific Railroad marching east from Sacramento, and the Union Pacific Railroad marching west from Omaha, building a 1,776 mile-long railroad of unprecedented scale through rugged and hostile country, to a meeting point not yet known."

Earlier this year, Giroux was a featured speaker at the Transcontinental Railroad 150th Anniversary Symposium in Sacramento and has spoken at several other milestone celebrations over the years, including as the American Society of Civil Engineering Chairman and featured speaker for the Brooklyn Bridge 125th Celebration in New York and at the 75th anniversary of the Hoover Dam.

Community "pack-out" party to help homeless students

By Diane Claytor

Living in a community of million-plus dollar homes, winter ski trips to Tahoe and summer family vacations to Hawaii, Europe or Disneyland, it's often easy to forget that not everyone is so fortunate. In fact, in the Mt. Diablo Unified School District, with schools only a short drive away from Lamorinda's bucolic communities, there are 650 homeless students. That's 650 children without their own bedroom, many without an actual roof over their heads; some are living temporarily with family or friends, some are in shelters, others are sleeping in cars.

When Sharon McGinnis Girdlestone, an Orinda mom and entrepreneur with an amazingly huge heart, learned about this, she found it "shocking and heart-wrenching" and knew she had to do something to help these children. She spoke with Sandra Wohali, administrator of MDUSD's Homeless Outreach Program for Education (HOPE), then talked with local nonprofit agencies and friends, who then contacted their friends and soon a movement was born.

Wohali confirmed what McGinnis Girdlestone assumed: most of these students can't afford hygiene items and often come to school without bathing or brushing their teeth.

"People in this community are so generous," McGinnis Girdlestone noted. "Once you tell them about a need, they're happy to jump in and do something." And so many already have.

With the goal of providing every one of those 650 homeless students a backpack filled with a toothbrush and toothpaste, deodorant, hairbrush, and cleaning

wipes, Lamorinda residents are eagerly contributing to the project. Moraga's Courtney Brockmeyer, CEO of Sydney Paige backpacks, provided the backpacks; 500 toothbrushes were recently received and "one parent donated 1,500 body washes and lotions," McGinnis Girdlestone proudly noted. But there's still a lot more needed.

As of April 26, only 38 percent of the goal had been reached. "We're asking people to sponsor as many items as they can so that we not only provide full hygiene kits to all 650 homeless students, but also help them feel loved, cared for and believed in," McGinnis Girdlestone wrote. The hope is to also have a personally written note of encouragement included in each backpack.

It's so easy to do: simply go to sydney-paige.roonga.com and choose the products you'd like to purchase for this very worthwhile endeavor. McGinnis Girdlestone acknowledges that these products are a higher quality than ones you may typically find at the local dollar store because, she said, "These kids deserve to have something a little nicer than a simple plastic toothbrush."

On May 9 from 4 to 7 p.m., there will be a "community pack-out party" to place all the items into the backpacks and write brief caring notes. A very generous Orinda homeowner is offering her Wilder home for this gathering and participants are encouraged to bring their children to help with the assembly. To sign up for the "pack out party," email McGinnis Girdlestone at sharon.mcginis@gmail.com. "We'll have a blast giving back together as a community," she promises.

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