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## Town bids farewell to retiring Chamber executive director

By Vera Kochan

Anyone who replaces Moraga Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Kathe Nelson will have some very big shoes to fill. Nelson announced her retirement in January, and according to the Chamber's board of directors president, Brandi Ford, the search continues for someone to carry the torch.

Nelson has been with the chamber for 10 years, serving as ambassador for Moraga's businesses. She has promoted the "Shop Moraga First" ideology, helped to create the town's first special Commercial Zoning District, and worked tirelessly on the annual Moraga Community Fair, Moraga's Farmers' Market, the Chamber Golf Tournament, business marketing studies, a Chamber Directory

(to aid residents in locating local businesses), and helped to promote a town/gown relationship with Saint Mary's College students by encouraging them to shop locally.

Along with her husband, Walter, the Nelsons plan to move to Oregon to live out their golden years. Making note of that, the members of board recently posted well wishes to Nelson on social media: "Thank you for managing our chamber for the past 10 years, for your work with all the merchants, non-profits and college here in town. Our best to you and Walter in your retirement."

Mayor Mike McCluer proclaimed Feb. 10 Kathe Nelson Day and joined the other council members and town staff in thanking Nelson and wishing her a happy retirement during the council's meeting.

"Moraga is a very special community," stated Nelson. "It runs on the participation of volunteers and a very loyal, small business base. I'm proud to have been a small part in the development and advantageous changes to the business community through the support of the town and through the council, and for that we are deeply grateful."

"Moraga and the business community will always hold a very special place in my heart," continued Nelson, "and I look forward to checking in and learning about the fruition of the Moraga Specific Plan; the growth and community support of our local businesses; and the continued cooperation of the town and the chamber in making the business community even stronger and more supported by the community."

## Education foundation donations critical for high school student wellness during pandemic



Photo Shirley DeFrancisci

By Jenn Freedman

Wellness Centers on high school campuses are a powerful investment in the health and academic potential of students, and are especially critical during this unpredictable, stressful time. Distance learning and the accompanying isolation has exacerbated mental health issues at local high schools, and the Wellness Centers are operating at capacity. Although education foundation fundraising has been challenging during the COVID-19 pandemic, supporting student wellness has never been more crucial.

All four Acalanes Union High School District (AUHSD) high schools – Acalanes, Miramonte, Campolindo, and Las Lomas – have Wellness Centers staffed with counselors, thanks to ongoing local support through donations to education foundations. The centers opened in 2017-18 in response to the rise of teen anxiety, depression, suicide, and stress. The centers provide increased early interventions for students experiencing social-emotional or mental health challenges that may be affecting learning in the classroom.

Wellness programs have a proven ability to support students with academics and increase engagement in the school community. Each Wellness Center offers individual/group counseling (primarily telehealth with limited in-person), crisis support, and other interventions aimed at addressing a multitude of teen-related issues: stress, depression, bullying, gender questions, grief, drug/alcohol abuse,

and anxiety. They also offer group sessions for parents/guardians and training for teachers and staff.

AUHSD Superintendent, Dr. John Nickerson, explains, "The origin of our Wellness Centers are rooted in declining mental health data we have seen with our students. Adolescence brings so many challenges today that that didn't exist even 10 years ago. Given there is no state funding for the degree of mental health support our students need, the support of our education foundations has been absolutely critical to advance toward our vision for the Wellness Centers. And we were seeing some signs of modest improvement in mental health data since the Centers have been open. With the pandemic, however, the social-emotional and mental health needs of our students have increased dramatically. Our education foundation support for the Centers has never been so important for our students."

During distance learning, Wellness Centers have adapted their programs and outreach to optimize student support. All four centers visited virtual classrooms in the fall to ensure every freshman and sophomore had a face-to-face experience. Wellness teams have also shared curriculum about suicide prevention and awareness to all students.

School sites are also adapting to the specific needs of their

students. For example, at Campolindo High School, the Wellness Center offers lunchtime Zoom hangouts each week, including a ninth-grade hang to connect with other freshmen, a LGBTQ+ hangout, and a vision board hangout. The Acalanes High School center also offers wellness classes and activities like journaling, games, and mindfulness practice. Miramonte's Wellness Center recently surveyed students and is now developing affinity spaces for specific student groups like Students of Color Group and LGBTQ+ Group. And the Las Lomas High School center is implementing mindful Monday classes and is also training peer educators for tobacco use prevention.

While the Wellness Centers are sufficiently supporting student needs during distance learning, the demands will shift and increase as schools shift back to in-person learning. Assistant Superintendent Amy McNamara warns, "We're taking a deep breath, knowing that it will be very challenging when students return to campus in the fall. Chaos in households from job loss and social isolation, and the trauma that comes with loneliness are all factors that we will need to address with students when they return."

Each education foundation raises funds for the town's school district serving students from TK through eighth grade, as well as the town's high school. These foundations are connected through their mutual support for the AUHSD. The Moraga Education Foundation supports Campolindo, Lafayette Partners in Education supports Acalanes, Orinda Network for Education supports Miramonte, and Walnut Creek Education Foundation supports Las Lomas.

Community support is critical because of the insufficient state funding public schools receive in Lamorinda. California ranks 41st in the nation for per pupil funding of public schools, and 48th for counselors per student (with 663 students for one counselor).

To donate, go to:  
MEF: [www.moragaeducation.org](http://www.moragaeducation.org)  
LPIE: [www.lpie.org](http://www.lpie.org)  
ONE: [www.oneorinda.org](http://www.oneorinda.org)  
WCEF: [www.wcef12.org](http://www.wcef12.org)

## Multiple PG&E projects pursued in Moraga

... continued from Page A1

Hardening work includes the installation of stronger and more resilient poles, using covered power lines that are thicker and provide more insulation and other upgraded equipment."

Sarkissian explained why this endeavor is taking so long to complete. "Over the course of the project, PG&E faced some delays due to re-deployment of electric crews to emergencies, including wildfires, wind events and recent mud slides. We thank our Lamorinda customers for their patience and understanding." The work on this particular project is nearly complete with crews working overhead and underground while maintaining COVID guidelines.

A new project that is also underway involves a pipeline replacement in front of

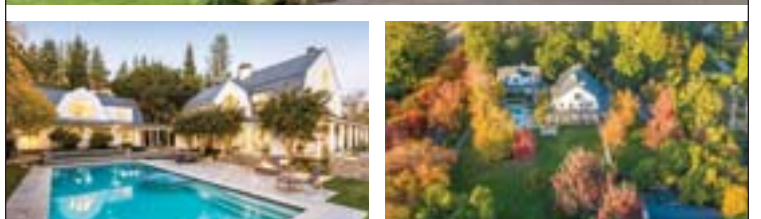
Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School. "PG&E recently started a safety and reliability project, safely upgrading gas distribution main and service lines in Moraga," stated Sarkissian. "The replacement project is on Camino Pablo between Canyon Road and Bella Vida Lane, as well as Madsen Court. There are no plans for this work to interrupt gas service." The job is expected to be completed by April (weather permitting) and with no road closures or significant traffic issues. This project's contractor is a mix of PG&E crews and Miller Pipeline.

Moraga's Assistant Engineer Sharon Chan stated, "If you are traveling within any of these areas, please be aware of construction activities and obey all construction signage. We appreciate your patience during construction."



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