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Photo Jeff Heyman

# Crowds fill Lafayette’s Plaza Park to ring in the holidays

By Jeff Heyman

If there is ever a time of year when the weather cannot dampen spirits, it is undoubtedly the holiday season – especially here in Lafayette, Moraga and Orinda. And in spite of the dark, gloomy skies and temperatures in the 40s, the holidays officially started in Lamorinda on Sunday, Dec. 7, with the annual “It’s a Wonderful Life in Lafayette” celebration, which this year outdid itself in attendance, merriment, and sheer joy. Hundreds of merry-makers

— some estimates put the number at over 1,000 — gathered in Lafayette’s cultural center, Plaza Park, for the not-to-be-missed wintertime event hosted by the Lafayette Chamber of Commerce. Spirits certainly burned bright (perhaps thanks to the hot chocolate provided by the Rotary Club) as local lads and lassies not only performed for adoring parents and grandparents, but also accompanied Santa as he made his customary police-escorted en-

trance to the Plaza to usher in the holiday season. Booths lined the Plaza offering all types of holiday fare, from wreaths to sweets, while diners at the restaurants surrounding Plaza Park had ringside seats to the festivities, making their gastronomical adventure all the more merry. Festive celebrations such as this are another reason why we are so lucky to live in Lamorinda.

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# Miramonte captures NCS crown but falls in heartbreaking final second of NorCal Championship

By Jon Kingdon



Miramonte boys water polo celebrates their NCS Championship win.

Photo Ann Murphy

In the competitive Diablo Athletic League, Miramonte boys water polo finished with a 24-7 record, winning their league with a 7-0 record, won the NCS Championship defeating Campolindo 15-7, and lost in the NorCal Championship game against Sacred Heart Prep 11-10 on a goal scored on the last second of the game. Despite accepting such a difficult loss to conclude the season, co-head coach Drew Holland focused on the positives of the season: “When you evaluate the whole season, it was a special year. We had a really talented group that played well together and kept improving throughout the season. Along with our post-season success, we got third place at the Elite Eight tournament, which is an all-California tournament, and got fourth place at the North-South tournament which were a couple of our goals and that was big for us.”

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**Lafayette Public Meetings**  
**City Council:** Regular Meeting: Monday, Jan. 12, 7 p.m.  
Lafayette Library & Learning Center-Don Tatzin Community Hall  
**Planning Commission:** Monday, Jan. 5, 7 p.m.  
Lafayette Library & Learning Center-Don Tatzin Community Hall  
**Design Review:** Tuesday, Jan. 20, 7 p.m.  
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## Lafayette Park Theater renovations move forward

By Gwyneth Lee



Jim Rizzo from NeonWorks in Berkeley removes the original Novial glass neon tubing from the Art Deco Park Theater tower on Dec. 5 to keep it safe and restore it.

Photo Craig Isaacs BlueGoo Photography

The Park Theater, originally opened in 1941, has been dark since 2005 – but that is all set to change beginning in 2026.

After the Park Theater Trust reached their goal of \$12 million earlier this year, which includes the sale of the four-plex currently part of park property, it adjusted its goal to \$15 mil-

lion due to increased construction costs. On Dec. 3, the Trust announced a dollar-for-dollar match challenge after two families from the community offered to match \$100,000 in donations from Dec. 4 through Dec. 31. The Trust hopes to use this match challenge to close the funding gap.

As part of the recon-

struction, Jim Rizzo from NeonWorks in Berkeley removed the original Novial glass neon tubing from the Art Deco Park Theater tower on Dec. 5 to keep it safe and restore it. Rizzo used a 60-foot box lift crane, removing each hand-tied section of tubing, and racked the tubes for future repair and refurbishment. According to the Park Theater Trust, the city of Lafayette has designated the much-loved tower as Public Art because of its commanding presence in the heart of Lafayette's downtown and in recognition of the art form that neon represents.

The project construction is expected to last at least 12 to 18 months. At the Nov. 24 City Council meeting, City Manager Niroop Srivatsa's brought up the Park Theater renovations, and the request from the Park Theater Trust to use the front sidewalk and parking spaces in front of the theater for construction.

"Our codes require that any private development pay for the cost of using those private facilities," Srivatsa said at the meeting. "However, the codes also allow the City Council to provide an exception to the payment of those fees, as well as the encroachment permit issuance fee, and the Park Theater Trust has requested such

relief from you. Staff has looked at the code, and we believe we can make the findings to grant this exception to the payment of fees."

The money saved would go directly toward reconstruction.

The city made a \$500,000 contribution to the Park Theater Trust several years ago. Given this previous investment, council ultimately approved the exception on the basis that the project functions as a city-sponsored activity and provides community benefit.

"I want to be careful about this being deemed as establishing a precedent, whereby the city forgives these fees that are already in our statutes, if you will," Council Member Jim Cervantes said before the unanimous approval to wave the fees. "I think in this case, we're already as a city invested in this project, so for us to kick in \$500,000 in one year and several years later take back \$200,000 doesn't make a whole lot of sense to me."

For more information on the Park Theater Trust renovations and the matching challenge, visit [www.parktheatertrust.org](http://www.parktheatertrust.org).

## Lafayette Mayor Susan Candell hands gavel to newly selected leadership

By Jennifer Wake



Newly selected Mayor Carl Anduri sits center of the dais, with now former Mayor Susan Candell and new Vice Mayor John McCormick to his right.

Photo courtesy City of Lafayette

During the Dec. 8 city council meeting, outgoing Mayor Susan Candell was showered with praise by staff of Sen. Tim Grayson and Assemblymember Rebecca Bauer-Kahan, as well as Supervisor Candace Andersen who underscored Candell's tenacity, her love of the city of Lafayette, and her desire to find common ground. Before handing the gavel to newly selected Mayor Carl Anduri and Vice Mayor John McCormick, Candell thanked the city staff and talented volunteers and outlined all that had been accomplished during her second term as mayor of Lafayette, including the

Measure H win, balancing the budget, finalizing the Housing Element, working on housing projects and downtown enhancements such as the new Aqueduct Pathway Project, as well as working with Lafayette Little League and LMYA on changes at Buckeye Fields.

In addition to lots of enthusiastic mentions of the cake that would be served after that portion of the meeting concluded, Anduri thanked Candell for taking on the role of mayor, and applauded "the way you've reached out to try to bring people together and try to get them to reach common ground

on issues before they get to the council."

Anduri expressed his desire to make a difference in Lafayette with the help of McCormick through special projects and three main city initiatives: "preparing for and mitigating wildfire risk, implementing our Housing Element, and continuing to plan for fiscal responsibility." The council will do a mid-course review of these priorities at the next meeting in January.

On behalf of the city, Anduri presented Candell with a pen for her service – and then they adjourned for cake.

**Best Wishes for a Wonderful Holiday Season!**

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# Town Hall Theatre presents ‘Snowbound’ through Dec. 20

By Sharon K. Sobotta



Back row, from left: Matthew Gardner (Jimmy), Chloë Parmelee (Jane), Aero England (Erin), Melody Ng (Lily), Jon Porter Lee (Ken), Dominic Antonich (Jesus). Front row: Danny Georgiev (Sydney)

Photo Craig Isaacs BlueGoo Photography

Imagine sitting in front of a fireplace with a cup of hot cocoa in a cozy reprieve from a blustery blizzard happening outside – quietly trying to make peace with the plans that Mother Nature forced you to change. At Town Hall Theatre’s world premiere of “Snowbound,” the audience bears witness to a collective of high schoolers who couldn’t be more different, a teacher and a bus driver pushing their way into a seemingly abandoned home after the winter storm forced them off the road.

Richard Perez, the artistic director at Town Hall Theatre co-wrote “Snowbound” with Kimberly Ridgeway, in part, because he wanted to offer something a little different this holiday season.

“We both got tired of seeing the same old thing,” Perez says. “We wanted to come up with something a little different that was a little more open to other people’s experiences.”

The crew in “Snowbound” is on their way to the Quiz Bowl in 1992. It turns out that in spite of the students being on the same team, they know

very little about each other. Among them is a homecoming queen who surprises everyone when she lights the fire, her rival who believes she should’ve been a young man whose story is rooted in childhood immigration, a shy girl who joined the team in hopes of making friends and a teen boy who might have a crush on his teammate in spite of being terrified to do anything about it. In the pre-cell phone era, with only an FM radio to give the stranded travelers weather updates, “Snowbound” could be a metaphor for life that demands that we slow down, be present and accept the fact that things rarely go according to plan.

The Town Hall Theatre, like most theatres, is still recovering from the pandemic and hopes to lure community members back inside to partake in the shared experience of theatre in a homey-atmosphere that also offers up snacks, hot holiday-themed drinks, wine and beer that can be enjoyed inside the theatre. “We’re really committed to telling a diverse swath of stories that you don’t always get

to see in this area,” Perez says. “We’re proud of that and we love engaging with the community to tell the stories they’re interested in.”

Lafayette resident Kirk Dakis says the play took him to a good place – literally and figuratively as he sipped his hot cocoa topped with a bed of whipped cream, traveling down fairytale lane. “I felt like I was in a blizzard and the cast made me feel like I was in the cabin with them. I had such a good time that I’m considering going again and bringing a friend or two.”

“Snowbound” will play at the Town Hall Theatre (3535 School Street in Lafayette) Thursday through Saturday, with the last showing on Dec. 20. For tickets or information, visit <https://www.townhalltheatre.com/snowbound>

# City Council authorizes funding for Buckeye Fields rehabilitation package

By Gwyneth Lee

During the Nov. 24 Lafayette City Council meeting, Recreational Manager John Warshaw provided an update of the synthetic turf feasibility of Buckeye Fields and proposed a one-time rehabilitation package.

Previously at its Oct. 27 meeting, the council approved the capital improvements for shared baseball and softball use at Buckeye Fields to be compliant with the California Fair Play Act. Following that action, the Parks, Trails, and Recreation staff worked with engineers and consultants to look into the logistics of installing synthetic infield.

“A couple of the key items that we learned is the required engineering, design, and bid process would take six to nine months, with an eight- to 12-week construction timeline,” War-

shaw said at the meeting. “In addition, synthetic turf would need to be paired with the Buckeye patio and drainage project that we actually paused design for in 2023 due to lack of funding.”

After factoring in all aspects of the project, including the patio and drainage upgrades, engineering, design, and project management, the project total is estimated to exceed \$1.2 million, Warshaw said. Considering the cost and lack of a dedicated funding source, Buckeye’s synthetic turf remains a longer-term capital project, and will not be ready for the 2026 baseball and softball season, he noted.

After evaluating the four fields and considering community feedback from all four user groups, staff came up

with a one-time rehabilitation package that would benefit baseball and softball for the 2026 season. Staff requested authorization to release \$85,680 from the Ballfields Rehabilitation Sinking Fund to support this. The council unanimously approved this item.

“We met with both [Little League and LMYA],” Warshaw said. “Both groups were supportive of the proposal that we’re setting fourth. Each group does have their facility wish list that will be evaluated between Johnathan [Katayanagi], the commission, and also between the two of them.”

Please submit community stories/ pictures to:  
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*- The Katzman Team*

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**Chamber of Commerce:**  
www.moragachamber.org

**Moraga Citizens' Network:**  
www.moragacitizensnetwork.org

**Town Council Meeting ,**  
Wednesday, Jan. 14, 5:30 p.m.,  
Council Chamber

**Art in Public Places ,**  
Tuesday, Jan. 20,  
Terrace Room

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## Grocery Outlet groundbreaking ceremony held in Rheem Valley Shopping Center

By Vera Kochan



With this many people digging, Grocery Outlet should be open in no time.

Photo Vera Kochan

up several canopies to keep attendees dry while the heavens showered the future building's site as if to bless the event.

Property owner, US Realty Partners' CEO Jay Kerner stated that adding a Grocery Outlet in Town was "a major step forward. There's just been one choice for groceries, and we are happy to provide Moraga with another choice." Kerner believes that the Grocery Outlet will be a catalyst for the rest of Rheem Valley Shopping Center with the goal being to deliver an upgraded center in the future.

"The citizens of Moraga are really happy about this," added Mayor Steve Woehleke. Eric Lindberg, Grocery Outlet's chairman of the board stated, "This is very special to

me, because I live in Lafayette." He will soon "only have to drive four miles" to shop at one of his stores.

According to Deacon Project Manager Steve Boitano, there are three stages remaining before the expected mid-2026 grand opening. At the moment, all the work is being done underground, such as site preparation, utility installation, and foundation construction. The next stage is construction of the 17,404-square-foot building. Lastly, interior elements are added like shelves, cash register stations, etc.

Hopefully, this winter's rains won't delay the project for too long, but as the saying goes, "Good things come to those who wait."



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Not even rain could stop the Nov. 17 groundbreaking ceremony of the much-anticipated Grocery

Outlet coming to the Rheem Valley Shopping Center at 576 Center Street. Deacon Construction Company set

## Moraga Mayor Woehleke discusses State of the Town

By Vera Kochan

Moraga Mayor Steve Woehleke basically went door-to-door by presenting his State of the Town to various organizations within the community. Moraga Citizens Network hosted his Nov. 15 meeting at Moraga Valley Presbyterian Church's Fireside Room. The objective of the gatherings was to summarize the status of mission critical functions and to receive input from stakeholders. Woehleke prefaced, "We are a lean organization with dedicated employees."

The mayor wasted no time in discussing the Town's finances by explaining that "fiscal responsibility is Job 1, and balanced budgets are a Moraga requirement." For the fiscal year 2025/26 the budget stands at \$27.2 million, and the town has received notable recognition with a Standard & Poor's AAA Credit Rating, as well as another in a long line of Government Finance Officers Association Certificate of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting. The bulk of the Town's revenues (45%) comes from property taxes, followed by 23% total department revenues, 11% sales tax, 9% franchise fees, 6% transfers in, 3% interest, and 3% other. The General Fund appropriations by department are: Approximately \$4 million to the police department, just over \$2 million to public works and parks and rec, nearly \$2 million for non-departmental, just over \$1 million for general government, and nearly \$1 million to administrative services and

planning.

While discussing Town safety, Woehleke noted that "Moraga takes community policing very seriously." There has been an overall 70% drop in crime during 2025. Besides keeping Moraga safe, MPD has been involved in emergency operations/evacuation planning, Toys for Tots, National Night Out, drug/needle disposal, school campus liaison efforts, and Coffee with a Cop.

Moraga-Orinda Fire District continues to provide full-service support through fire prevention, fire suppression, and paramedics. "MOFD provides high quality emergency fire and medical support to Moraga and Orinda," stated the mayor. "We collectively need to address wildfire risks such as MOFD foliage regulations and the use of free mesh on gutters and vents." He noted that there are impending new requirements from the Department of Forestry at year-end (Zone Zero).

"The Planning Department has been a significant focus for the last 6 to 7 years," explained Woehleke, "much of it under the Comprehensive Advanced Planning Initiative. The key priorities were to modernize, follow state regulations, consider community priorities and values, and potential future growth. By the beginning of 2021, planning was underway to develop Moraga's 6th Cycle Housing Element per state requirements which included zoning 1,118 new housing units. It was approved by the Town Council at



Mayor Steve Woehleke gives State of the Town presentation.

Photo Vera Kochan

the beginning of 2023, and approved by the state later that year." Planning Department projects also included the Bollinger Canyon Re-zoning, Rheem Objective Design Standards, and a General Plan Update which earned the Daniel Burnham Award of Merit. Current projects under development are the 1600 School St. Apartments, Grocery Outlet, Affordable Senior Apartments in Rheem, and Moraga Center Specific Plan Area 15 Housing (pending).

The Town has seen the Public Works Department's efforts toward safety improvements, roadway paving and maintenance, and intersection and crosswalk upgrades. The Measure K one cent sales tax was approved in 2012, and provides significant funding for street maintenance. "Stormwater drains are another priority area for Moraga," explained Woehleke. "Moraga has experienced failures. Despite the citizens defeating the 2018 sales tax measure to effect repairs, we are making progress." Public Works has also been more than busy with regards to Town-owned properties

(Hacienda de las Flores, Moraga Library, Town Hall, and the Town Council Chambers). Repairs to roofs, stairways, HVAC systems, retaining walls, paving, flooding protection, and emergency power have all been on their agenda.

Woehleke described the Parks and Recreation Department as "a shining star of Moraga, facilitating fun and health" with 46 miles of mapped trails, over 1,200 youths attending summer camp, 608 kids enrolled in the After School Enrichment Program, over 200 active Parks and Rec programs in one year, and an Open Space Master Plan Development Project.

When it comes to education, the Town's schools are a stand-out. "Every Moraga elementary, middle, and high school ranks in the top 5% in California for academic achievement," said Woehleke. Not forgetting Saint Mary's College, the presentation listed several national accolades that sang the school's praises. Also noted were the men's and women's Division 1 athletics, the new accredited nursing program, and the addition of competitive water sports.



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# Moraga Public Works Director retires after nearly nine years on the job

By Vera Kochan



Shawn Knapp stands beside his first Town project – Canyon Road Bridge.

To say that Moraga Public Works Director/Town Engineer Shawn Knapp will leave behind a legacy of improvements during his tenure would be an understatement. The fact that he was a master at acquiring outside grants and funding, thereby saving the Town millions of dollars, points to his dedication to the job and all that it entailed. It speaks to the commitment he gave to Moraga and its residents from the minute he walked through the Town Offices door on his first day here.

From the moment Knapp showed up to begin initially serving as the town’s senior civil engineer in April 2017, his skills were put to the test. “I was supposed to get a lot of filing done and get accustomed to Moraga’s files and projects,” he recalled. “Before I’d even reached my desk, I was tasked with reopening a bridge that had been closed the night before.” He had to begin designing the new Canyon Road Bridge and secure funding for it. The entire cost of the project was nearly \$15 million of which the Town paid only \$873,245 thanks to \$14,118,755 in grants acquired by Knapp.

Another massive emergency project that Knapp had to tackle within his first months with the Town was the Rheem Boulevard Sinkhole Repair and Storm Drain Replacement. Within seven months of his arrival, the entire project was completed at a total cost of \$2.884 million of which the Town was responsible for only \$243,813 thanks to the \$2,640,187 in grants received due to Knapp’s diligence.

In the spring of 2020, Knapp took over the reins of the Public Works Department as its director, and the Town improvements kept rolling in. Between 2023-2025, the Street Rehabilitation “Worst First Residential Program” Projects used Measure K funding to repair Moraga’s crumbling streets beginning with the worst. More than half of the Town’s streets had a Pavement Condition Index ranking of 26 – 50 or Poor. Currently, the Town boasts a PCI of 78 or Good. “These exceedingly high street PCIs ranks the Town’s streets in the 86th percentile of all streets in the San

Francisco Bay Area, up from the Town’s 75th percentile in 2020,” stated Knapp.

Knapp’s storm drain projects have included the 2021-23 Town-wide repairs, Storm Drain Addendum of Measure K funding for the program, annual completion of storm drain repairs, the Center Street Sinkhole Abatement Project, maintenance inspection and cleaning, and Moraga Road and Hacienda Drainage Project.

The Traffic Safety Program and Capital Improvement Projects were a big focus of Knapp’s tenure in Moraga. He devoted his energies to: Annual Street Rehabilitation and Repair Projects; Annual Minor Traffic Safety Projects; Traffic Speed Studies; Moraga Road and Alta Mesa Intersection Improvements; Moraga Way and Canyon Road/Camino Pablo Improvements; Moraga Road Safety Improvements and Utility Undergrounding Project; three separate Town-wide Highway Safety Improvement Program Projects; Rheem Boulevard at Chalda Way Pedestrian Crossing Project; Local Roadway Safety Plan; St. Mary’s Roundabout Studies; Rheem Boulevard Slide Repair Project; Annual Traffic Signal Equipment Replacement Program; Corliss Drive Sidewalk to School Project; and Pedestrian Push Button Upgrades.

Knapp has begun several additional projects for the Town, many of which will be completed between 2026 – 2027, including the Moraga Road and Canyon Road Complete Streets project to increase pedestrian and bicycle safety; the Moraga Community Smart Signals Project to reduce transit delays, increase safety for multimodal users, coordinate evacuation routes, and reduce emergency response times; and the Mulholland Ridge Slide Rehabilitation Project to reinforce protection from heavy rain, flooding and landslides.

Projected for completion between 2030-2031, is the St. Mary’s Road Multimodal Safety Improvements Project that will create a traffic signal-controlled intersection at St. Mary’s Road/Rheem Boulevard and a stop sign-controlled intersection at

St. Mary’s Road/Bollinger Canyon Road. Knapp was successful in obtaining a nearly \$10 million State Transportation Improvement Program fund for the project.

In early conceptual stages is Knapp’s Moraga Way Safety and Connectivity Planning Study. “I am immensely proud of myself for originating the concept of developing a separated multi-use pathway/trail along Moraga Way to improve safety for school children, families, and recreational pedestrians and cyclists,” said Knapp. “The dual use of the separated pathway/trail would be for facilitating evacuations during an emergency.” Both Orinda and Contra Costa Transportation Authority are working with Moraga to obtain grant funding.

When asked for comments about Knapp, Mayor Steve Woehleke said, “Shawn’s ability to expertly apply his broad range of technical skills has been critical for a small town like Moraga. Shawn’s success in obtaining grant funding also demonstrates his very positive impact. For example, almost 50% of this year’s budget for facilities projects is sourced from grant funding. We will miss Shawn’s leadership and unique skill set.”

Council Member Lisa Maglio added that Knapp’s “dedication, expertise and skillfulness have made Shawn an exceptional Public Works Director/Town Engineer. Shawn’s graciousness, integrity, and humility show in everything he has done for our community. He has helped to make my work as a council member a joy and I will miss his steady presence and guidance.”

Council Member Brian Dolan felt that Shawn was “a perfect fit” for Moraga, noting how he “was able to accomplish a lot with a very small effective team.” Administrative Services Director Katie Bruner, Planning Director Sonia Urzua, and Senior Engineer Nate Levine expressed their appreciation for Knapp’s deep knowledge and all he has done for Moraga.

...continued on Page A9

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Christmas and New Year’s Day are on Thursdays this year; therefore Thursday and Friday customers will be pushed one day later both weeks to accommodate the holiday for drivers. Thursday customers will be serviced on Friday, and Friday customers will be serviced on Saturday, December 27 and January 3, 2026.

Week of Jan 5-9

Customers in Walnut Creek, Danville, Alamo, Diablo, and Blackhawk (including unincorporated areas).

Week of Jan 12-16

Customers in Lafayette, Orinda, and Moraga (including unincorporated areas).

Week of Jan 19-23

Any customers who missed prior tree collection.

AFTER Jan 23

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- Flocked trees can be collected using your annual on-call garbage cleanup at no cost, but must be scheduled in advance. Call 925.685.4711. If cut to fit inside with lid closed, flocked trees may be placed in your black landfill cart.
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## Moraga Town Council reorganizes

In one of the quickest Town Council reorganizations in recent years, its members took no time at all to select Moraga’s new mayor and vice mayor. As is customary during the last scheduled meeting of the calendar year, effective Dec. 10, Moraga’s new mayor is Kerry Hillis, who previously held the position of vice mayor. Moving up from council member to the vice mayor position is Brian Dolan. - V. Kochan





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www.cityoforinda.org  
Phone (925) 253-4200  
**Chamber of Commerce:**  
www.orindachamber.org  
**The Orinda Association:**  
www.orindaassociation.org

**City Council Reg. Meeting:**  
Tuesday, Jan. 13, 7 p.m.  
Orinda Library Auditorium  
**Planning Commission:**  
Wednesday, Jan 14, 7 p.m.  
Orinda Library Auditorium

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**COMPASS**

## Orinda allows bond measure for new senior housing project over union objections

By Sora O'Doherty

Travelers on Orinda Way in Orinda Village have probably noticed protesters at the intersection with Irwin Way. This dispute came before the Orinda City Council on Nov. 18, because the organization behind the construction of the approved new senior housing project, Vista Verde, asked the council to hold a hearing on their application for a \$15 million bond issue.

After hearing many speakers in support of the project, as well as a number of union members who oppose the project if it employs non-union workers, the council voted to approve the measure, with only Mayor Latika Malkani voting no. In casting her vote against, Malkani said that it was the most difficult decision she had to make in her three years on the council.

The council was required to hold the public hearing and to decide whether or not to adopt a resolution approving the issuance of the bonds by the California Public Finance Authority under the Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act (TEFRA). The bond issue was requested by Urban Core Development on behalf of the Orinda Senior Housing Foundation.

According to Assistant City Manager Doug Alessio, the council was not required to make specific findings but only to consider public input and determine whether issuance of the bonds would provide a public benefit.

There was no disagreement that there is a general need for housing, particularly housing for senior citizens at an affordable rent. The only controversy centered on



**Protestors demonstrate in Orinda Village against Orinda Senior Housing Foundation and proposed non-union workers.**

Photo Sora O'Doherty

whether or not the developers would be using only union labor and paying the prevailing rate.

Vista Verde, which has been seven years in the works and was approved unanimously by the City Council, will be a 53-unit affordable senior housing facility at 15 Irwin Way, located on the property of the Orinda Community Church. The project was approved by the city council in August 2022.

Former mayor Victoria Smith, president of the Orinda Senior Housing Foundation, spoke in support of the proposal, citing the critical need for the fully affordable senior housing project. She requested the council approve the tax-exempt bond issuance, stating that the city will bear no financial or legal liability. Without the bond issuance, she added, the project could not be built at all.

The dispute seems to have arisen when Oliver and Company, a long-established Orinda-based general contracting firm was replaced on the pro-

ject by Brown Construction, a company that has been in business over 60 years and is focused on affordable housing.

Daniel Bergman, project executive for Brown, explained to the council that whether prevailing wages are paid depends on the project and its financing and that the Vista Verde development does not require the payment of prevailing wages. He added that Brown bids projects with both union and non-union contractors. Bergman also stated that the company is transparent and willing to address any concerns from the council or unions, and he asserted that there is no factual basis for the allegations against the company.

In response to a question from Mayor Malkani, Ken Jones of Urban Core Development explained that in the previous bid cycle, Oliver and Company, which employs union members and pays prevailing wages, bid \$43 million while Brown Construction bid \$28 million, and uses non-union labor

and pays lower labor rates. The nearly \$15 million difference is largely attributable to the cost of union versus non-union labor. He added that the fact that an expected \$10 million donation fell through meant that the non-union bid was necessary to make the project feasible.

Although many speakers stated that they support unions, the overwhelming number of commenters agreed that the need for senior housing was paramount in a choice between guaranteeing union wages or having no project at all. Speakers in favor of the project include the administration and members of Orinda Community Church, upon whose land the project will be built, along with the two existing senior housing projects already in existence. Other proponents included former Orinda mayors, a representative of the Orinda Chamber of Commerce, Orinda residents and a retired affordable housing developer.

## Hugs for Harry is saving senior dogs in Orinda

By Sora O'Doherty



**Hugs for Harry Founder Melonie Jackson**  
Photo Sora O'Doherty

A shoe donation drive has thrown light on a local organizer who has devoted her life to saving senior and abandoned dogs, now operating in Orinda. It was the intention of Dinking for Dogs, a San Francisco non-profit that collects sneakers for the benefit of senior dogs, to bring

attention to Hugs for Harry, owned and operated by Melonie Jackson. Jackson owns and operates both Orinda Pet Grooming and Comfort Corner Grooming in Alamo.

Although a California native, Jackson spent a few years living in Indiana where she adopted

an old pitbull named Harry. Although Harry is no longer alive, Jackson vowed to maintain his legacy by continuing to teach the importance of pet neutering and by rescuing all the old, disabled, abandoned dogs that she can. In Indiana she used to take Harry to elementary schools and give talks about dog overpopulation and the importance of avoiding it.

Jackson has been rescuing dogs for 24 years, the last five of which have been in Orinda. "I'm a warrior," Jackson proclaims, and she is very proud of the work she does rescuing dogs. Jackson was born in 1957 and in her childhood was very poor, living in government housing. Her mother suffered from depression, but Jackson discovered that

dogs are one of the good parts of life.

She rescues many dogs, and sadly, many of the old, abandoned and abused dogs come to her from Stockton. Hugs for Harry's doors are open to the public from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., but someone is present with the dogs 24 hours a day and volunteers walk the dogs four to five times every day. Volunteers just knock on the door to get in, Jackson says.

Dina Azim is a volunteer who made a big change to Hugs for Harry, organizing it into a charitable 501c3 organization. Azim, who works full time in San Francisco, is now on the executive board, along with Jackson and Alexandra Sanders.

...continued on Page A9





*Wishing all of my clients, friends and neighbors joyful holidays and best wishes for a healthy and prosperous new year!*

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# Well-traveled Czech student enjoyed Orinda experience

By Sora O’Doherty



**Amalie Zahradnickova**  
Photo Sora O’Doherty

Amalie Zahradnickova has been the academic year 2025 visiting student from the Czech Republic. Like all the other students chosen from Tabor, Orinda’s Sister City, she loved the experience. Zahradnickova lives in small town about 20 minutes from Tabor called Milicin.

Zahradnickova is in her junior year of secondary school at home and would love to study medicine in Prague in the future. She likes the natural sciences, biology and chemistry. She also enjoys the feeling of helping other people.

Zahradnickova’s dad is a historian. Her mom has a few jobs. She makes jams and sells them at farmers’ markets. She has also translated books from French and English. Both of Zahradnickova’s older sisters are currently in college: the 21-year-old is studying to be a veterinarian, while her 19-year-old sister is studying law.

Her family doesn’t own a television, and Zahradnickova says that she has never really watched, except at her grandparents, where she watched cartoons. For news at home, she uses the internet, and for entertainment, she loves hanging out with friends. In Orinda, she took up running, trying out cross country. At home she is in a scout troop and she plays the violin in two orchestras.

Her time in Orinda is not the first time she has spent time away from home. For a month and a half one summer, she was an au pair for her cousin in Northern Ireland. Her cousin is Czech but moved to Ireland and lives 20 minutes away from Belfast in Bangor.

Zahradnickova has previously visited at least half of countries in the European Union. “In Europe we travel a lot,” she explained, and said that she would love to visit all of the countries in Europe. Her favorite city is Lisbon in Portugal. “It’s beautiful, with a little bit of everything” she noted, “it’s not too big, so you can walk everywhere.”

Since coming to California, she’s been to San Francisco, went to Lake Tahoe with a friend, and she loves to hike. “Carmel is beautiful,” she enthused, “I loved it.”

Bobbie Landers and her daughter Merrily took Zahradnickova to LA in October, including a visit to Disneyland.

Her host family, that of former Orinda Union School Board Member Liz Daoust, took her to New York City for Thanksgiving, and have plans to be in Colorado for Christmas.

Communicating with her family at home is a little hard with the time difference. Lately Zahradnickova has been calling them more “because I’ve been missing them more.” She admits to being a little homesick, sometimes. “It’s going to really hit me at Christmas,” she said.

However, she praised her host family, calling them amazing, and said that they make being away from home much easier. Daoust and her husband have three girls, including one in high school, who is a sophomore at Miramonte.

Although the visiting Czech students take classes at Miramonte, they are also responsible for keeping up their studies at home. At Miramonte, Zahradnickova is taking drama, anatomy and sports medicine, English and US history. She performed in the Halloween show that was presented to some classes at the

school. She enjoyed doing Shakespeare, studying “The Taming of the Shew.” She noted that one modern version of the play is the movie, “10 Things I Hate About You,” which is one of her favorite movies.

Zahradnickova said that her experience at Miramonte is very different than at school at home. “It’s amazing to see how the system works differently,” she said, adding, “the teaching is a little different, how the classes work. At home, everything is in one school building.”

After the Christmas break, she will head home to the Czech Republic on Jan. 8, where she will become part of the large cohort of Czech students who have enjoyed being the visiting student to Miramonte High School in Orinda.

The Sister City Foundation is already hard at work selecting the student to visit next year, and, as always, looking for a host family.

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# EBMUD grants long lease of former Cal Shakes Theater to local enterprise

By Sora O’Doherty

The East Bay Municipal Utility District on Dec. 1 signed a 15-year lease agreement with the non-profit group Siesta Valley Foundation (SVF). The lease covers the 9-acre amphitheater property located at 100 Gateway Boulevard and authorizes SVF to restore and operate the venue, formerly home to Cal Shakes, as Siesta Valley Bowl.

Lafayette resident Campbell Foster, chairman and co-founder of SVF, expanded upon the group’s vision, stating that currently they are putting together a 2026 season, which they would like to open in April. Foster, who has 25 years of experience in entertainment marketing, revealed that the first production will be something from Shakespeare produced by a local professional theater group.

Michael Karp, owner of The Fourth Bore Tap Room and Grill in Orinda, is the co-founder of SVF. Karp previously worked for Live Nation Entertainment, the world’s largest live entertainment company, and AEG (Anschutz Entertainment Group) a massive global sports and live entertainment company. SVF is currently seeking additional board members. Local attorney Joe Meccas is serving as the group’s

pro bono attorney.

Foster says that the group’s goal for next year is to have 20 live music events from April to the end of October. If the season is 214 days, the concert schedule will leave 194 days for other things. SVF would like to see community performances, including school orchestras and theater productions. They hope to have music for about 10% of available time.

He added that “Anybody can rent [the venue] out at cost, but we don’t know what cost is yet.” The group wants to continue having camps and educational programs, but not theatre camps, as Cal Shakes had offered. When asked what an afterschool program could look like, Foster confirmed that education will continue to be a big part of life at the Siesta Valley Bowl. He has already been speaking with Tana Barnett, the music director of Campolindo High School, about the school’s use of the Siesta Valley Bowl for some performances

Foster suggested that there will be resources for birders, hikers and conservationists. EBMUD has said that the agreement also establishes an EBMUD native plant and bird garden and a Watershed Community Center to advance public understanding of the land’s ecological value and fos-

ter environmental awareness. SVF has had preliminary talks with the Friends of the Orinda Nature Area about what programs might be possible at the venue.

“Siesta Valley Bowl is being revitalized for all East Bay communities,” according to Tom Romary, founder and chairman of Siesta Valley Bowl Inc. “Our team’s experience in entertainment, hospitality and technology is focused on building a sustainable venue operation that serves local audiences and artists while contributing lasting cultural and economic value to the region.”

Foster concluded that former Cal Shakes donors have been very curious and interested in the success of the new venture. He added that SVF would like to be more involved with the Lamorinda community, while at the same time serving as an asset for the whole East Bay. He criticized Cal Shakes for never, for example, performing at local schools, which he now sees as a possibility, as well as having local schools performing at Siesta Valley Bowl.

For more information, visit: <https://siestavalley.org/>



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# Looking Good in Lamorinda

## Accessorize for the holidays

By Moya Stone



**Stacking jewelry from Parker Thatch.**  
Photo courtesy Parker Thatch

Stacking jewelry is having a moment. It's a 'the more the merrier' situation for pendants, bracelets, and rings. When it comes to stacking, Irene Chen, handbag designer and co-owner of Parker Thatch in Orinda, advised in her newsletter: "The key is to be fearless, go bold, make a statement - be you." Chen likes to layer big pendants on chunky chains and sport a large ring on every finger, but there are no rules other than to play: large with small, mixed metals, pops of color. "Combinations that tell your story," Chen said.

Parker Thatch offers an array of jewelry just right for stacking, including simple sculptural rings, link

chains, large pendants, wide and narrow bracelets, and classic charm motifs such as the horse shoe and the heart. Most of the jewelry selection is gold plated on brass, giving a warm, vibrant look. Check out the website: <https://parkerthatch.com>.

The editors at Vogue magazine want to know why everyone is wearing a "tiny crochet skullcap." Apparently, the tight-fitting cap was spotted on many a fashionista during the spring 2025 fashion week in Copenhagen, as well as on runway models for Prada. The skullcap reaches back to the 1970s, although they were a popular dressy choice for women in the 1920s as well. The current revisit fits in with the general trend for all things vintage. Also on trend is hand-made. So, why not hop on both and make a cap for yourself or a holiday gift? Crochet caps are what's hot right now and Busy Stix yarn shop in

Lafayette is just the place to pick up some yarn and a tip or two on crocheting.

"Claire McCardell: The Designer Who Set Women Free" by Elizabeth Evitts Dickinson (Simon & Schuster) was by far my favorite read this year. Most of us involved in fashion know of this revolutionary women's fashion designer and there was a time in the 1950s when McCardell was a household name, but she fell off the radar, as did many women designers of that era. It's about time she gets some recognition!

There are four parts to the book starting with McCardell's childhood in Maryland at the turn of the last century. At a young age she knew she wanted to design clothing for women – "she was determined to save the world from ugliness and dreary clothes" – and she also wanted to address the need for comfortable, functional

clothing. Over the course of her long career, she introduced the wrap dress, ballet flats, hoodies, and mix and match separates, all of which have become classic staples.

Dickinson, an award-winning journalist, paints for us a very full picture of McCardell and her life, providing details of her surroundings, quotes from letters and essays, and historical context such as the Depression and WWII. The is a great read for any fashion enthusiast.

Speaking of books, they make good gifts and we are lucky in Lamorinda to have two bookstores - Orinda Books located in Orinda Village Square and Reasonable Books in Lafayette.

Stay well-accessorized this holiday season and go forth in style.

*Moya Stone is a fashion writer and blogger at [www.overdressedforlife.com](http://www.overdressedforlife.com).*

## Expert makeup tips for the holidays

By Ellis Von Hampton

It's that special time again for celebrations, the hosting of parties, making memories and enjoying the magic of the holiday season. Here are a few secrets for keeping your skin looking young, healthy, resilient and flat out amazing, for that wow factor that will keep them guessing at those get-togethers this year.

First, find the right cleanser and moisturizer for day and night: If you feel like you need a little extra, serums and an eye cream are a mini-miracle to slow the hands and signs of Father Time. Second, find the right founda-

tion and all essentials that you need to have that holiday look. I recommend asking the experts about the perfect shade along with a loose powder, a little blush, and the right mascara (avoid the water proof variety as you will lose lashes over time).

A cream blush seems to last longer than powder, especially when you're celebrating at a lengthy event or entertaining through the hours. As for eyeshadows, a little shimmer is always a hit in moderation, followed by a nice lipstick with lipliner, which will keep the lipstick from running.

Take that powder puff along your lip line as this also prevents the lipstick from running, or if you choose to use a lip liner and a gloss, which is also perfect, some of my personal choices for color during the holiday season are deeper reds and wine colors that are simply stunning.

And for the guys.... I didn't forget about you either! Make sure to use lip balms, such as Beekman, Sunburn, or Aquaphor lip balm.

It is my most sincere and heartfelt wish that everyone is having the best of times this holiday season.

## Letters to the Editor

**Clean Air and Lower Bills: The Case for Heat Pump Water Heaters**

Heat pump water heaters are rapidly becoming a popular choice — and for good reason. These clean, efficient systems replace polluting methane gas water heaters in our homes. When I had to replace mine in 2023, I chose a heat pump model. My utility bill went down thanks to its high efficiency, and I know I'm helping reduce harmful air pollution.

According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, gas prices are expected to continue rising even as renewable energy — an increasing share of our electricity — becomes cheaper. A January 2025 report by the California Heat Pump Partnership also found that sales of heat pump water heaters surged in 2023 as more Californians learned about their benefits.

The health toll of air pollution on

our hearts and lungs prompted our regional Air District to phase out, beginning in 2027, water heaters that emit nitrogen oxides — because pollutants harm our health. That means when it's time to replace your old water heater, you'll need to install a clean, high-efficiency heat pump water heater.

Admittedly, the transition isn't always smooth. My own installation was more complicated and cost a bit more than a gas replacement. But each year, it's getting easier. Newer 120-volt models, for example, are simpler and cheaper to install.

Unfortunately, gas companies and their allies are now working to overturn the Air Districts rules phasing out methane gas to protect their profits. Don't be misled — do your own research and learn why so many homeowners are making the switch.

Ask yourself: What kind of future

do you want for your family and community? Cleaner air, fewer health problems, and a more stable climate? If so, supporting heat pump water heaters and HVAC systems is a powerful step toward that future.

All of us — especially children, older adults, and those with chronic illnesses — deserve clean air. Your choices at home, and your support for the Air District's appliance standards, help lead us toward a brighter, healthier tomorrow.

Marti Roach  
Moraga

### Rising housing costs and limited housing options in Lamorinda

I've lived in Lamorinda long enough to notice the sharp rise in housing prices. The increased cost of living has made it extremely difficult for young families to live here. This isn't just an unfortunate trend. It's a structural problem that's reshaping our community.

A major reason for this is that our housing supply has barely changed while demand has rapidly increased over the last decade. Lafayette, Orinda, and Moraga continue to almost exclusively build large single-family homes. Additionally, complex environmental regulations in the state and especially in the East Bay have led to high costs and delays, inhibiting developers from adding new homes to the market.

When zoning limits the types of housing we allow, and regulations drive up development costs, demand shifts onto the limited homes that already exist, pushing prices even higher. This has been a serious problem impacting teachers, first responders, young professionals, and longtime residents hoping to downsize.

The consequences of these policies are already visible. Schools struggle to hire local staff, workers are pushed into long commutes because they can't afford to live near their jobs, and young adults increasingly find they cannot return to the town where they were raised. Many older residents are forced out as they downsize, weakening the character of the community.

This doesn't mean changing everything about Lamorinda or building anything extreme. It simply requires allowing more flexibility in our community. Streamlining some of our environmental and zoning rules is crucial in addressing one of the biggest challenges our area faces today. Duplexes, townhomes, and condominiums would fit the scale of our neigh-

borhoods. These types of housing already exist here in small numbers, but to meaningfully increase affordability, we need to scale up their development.

If we value a diverse, multigenerational community, then we need to make room for it. Thoughtful, modest changes to our housing and permitting process would have meaningful benefits. Families will stay close, commute times will shorten, and young people will be able to see a future for themselves in Lamorinda.

Dillon Nagar  
Lafayette

### Affordable senior housing

Orinda's Mayor, Latika Malkani, actually voted against affordable senior housing in downtown Orinda. Let that sink in. Public Hearing was held on Nov. 18, 2025. She opposed affordable senior housing, even though there was no cost to the City. Affordable senior housing downtown has been one of the highest priorities of the residents, as expressed in multiple surveys over the years. Why did Mayor Malkani oppose it? Because, as she explained at the hearing, the affordable housing would be built without any requirement for union labor. Her law practice consists of representing labor unions. Labor unions contributed to her campaign.

As explained at the meeting, there was a bid using union labor and paying prevailing wages of \$43 million, a bid using a mix of union and non-union of \$34 million, and a bid using non-union labor of \$28 million. The differences are largely accounted for by different labor rates of \$70/hour for union vs. around \$35–40/hour for non-union. The Foundation building the housing had expected a \$10 million donation that fell through, creating a larger financing gap, making the non-union bid necessary to keep the project financially feasible. Mayor Malkani acknowledged that the project "had to" get built but expressed concern about whether the workers would be able "to support their families." She could not, apparently, understand that a requirement for union labor would result in the project not getting built and no one getting paid. Fortunately, the other four members of the City Council voted in favor, and the matter passed 4-1.

Nick Waranoff  
Orinda

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~ Life in LAMORINDA ~

## 81-year-old still mentors Mah Jongg students in Lafayette

By Sora O’Doherty

When teacher Alice Stern says that she grew up “hearing” Mah Jongg, everyone whose mom had a weekly game knows exactly what she means – the soothing clack of Mah Jongg tiles being shuffled as their mom and her weekly group prepared for their next game. Of course, there was also the babble of gossip and ringing laughter as they took a break for snacks or lunch.

Stern thought that she would never play Mah Jongg, and yet here she is, 16 years into being a Mah Jongg teacher and still going strong. For the uninitiated, Mah Jongg is an old Chinese game played with beautiful thick tiles in suits like playing cards.

Stern doesn’t just teach Mah Jongg, she has written a book called “No Jokers in a Pair,” which is intended as a guide for other teachers of the game. All of the proceeds from Stern’s teaching and her book are donated to the Assistance League of Diablo Valley (ALDV).

Over the past 16 years, she has donated over \$15,000 and continues to donate. All of the money from her book sales also goes to the ALDV scholarship fund. Her book is available at Vintage Vida, located two doors down from Postino restaurant on Mt. Diablo Boulevard. Another Lafayette store,

Venture Quality Goods sells Mah Jongg sets designed by one of Stern’s former students.

Mah Jongg grew popular in the U.S. in the 1920s, becoming a cultural phenomenon, especially among women. The National Mah Jongg League (NMJL) formed in 1937 to standardize rules for American Mah Jongg, introducing unique elements like jokers, racks, and yearly changing hands.

In 2010 Stern joined the ALDV, which operates the Way Side Inn Thrift Shop near the Lafayette Theater. Her neighbor kept asking her to join, so she finally went to her first meeting. At one of the early meetings, someone asked if she knew anyone who plays Mah Jongg? Stern began teaching women from ALDV who were interested.

She went to the Lafayette Community Center and said she’d like to teach Mah Jongg there. She was asked by the Recreation Supervisor John Warshaw, “How do I know you’d be any good?” Stern laughed as she recounted the story. “I gave him a stern look, and asked him, what is Mah Jongg?” On the first day of registration, Warshaw called and said, “I am so sorry I doubted you.” Her class had sold out in the first hour after registration opened. She went on to teach about

three years of Mah Jongg classes there, consisting of four lessons, each three hours long.

After three years, Stern decided she didn’t want to teach at the Community Center any longer. Now she plays there instead, every Tuesday. “As far as I was concerned, I thought I was done,” she reported.

Two months later, a former student called and said she had six friends who wanted to learn MJ. And so, Stern began offering private lessons to six students at a time. She started at a cost of \$50 for the series of four classes, which later grew to \$75 and is now at \$150, with all proceeds donated to the ALDV.

By December 2025 Stern had taught upwards of 250 students, and loves doing it. She loves meeting new people and sharing the game. Stern says that most of her students are in their 50s.

Two months ago, Stern decided to write a book to teach Mah Jongg teachers. She kept hearing that students were taking classes in Mah Jongg, but they weren’t learning. Recognizing that she is coming close to the end of her teaching days, she wanted to get her method down in writing.

“Maybe one day my granddaughters will want to learn,” she speculated. She has already



Mah Jongg teacher Alice Stern and her former student, Kara Overaa Gragg, demonstrate with the three new styles of tiles designed by Gragg.

Photo Sora O’Doherty

taught her 12-year-old granddaughter to play. That granddaughter is the child of her son Todd Stern, a wildfire safety ambassador in Moraga and Orinda. Stern also has a daughter, Andrea, who lives in Westchester New York.

Three years ago, she was teaching a group, and one woman in the group was named Kara, who turned out to be the daughter of a woman artist Stern knew when her children were in Lafayette schools. Kara’s mother’s name was Gail Overaa, said Stern, and she recalled that Gail’s husband ran C. Overaa &

Co. – a construction company now working on the Cancer Support Community San Francisco Bay Area and the Park Theater restoration, both projects in Lafayette.

“Kara now works for the family business, doing the marketing. She has the artistic talent of her mother,” Stern continued, “and she couldn’t stop thinking about designing her own set [of tiles].”

Mah Jongg tiles had been the same since their invention in China in the 1880s. Overaa has now designed three different sets of tiles with

modern designs suitable for use for either American or Chinese Mah Jongg games.

Her tiles, plus other accessories she has designed, are available for purchase on her website, fourfriendsmahjong.com with 10% of all proceeds donated to charity. You can also find Stern’s books and the “Ask Alice” feature on the website, where visitors can find answers to Mah Jongg questions.

Stern can be reached by email at Nojokersmahjongg@gmail.com

## SMC students break plates to release finals week stress

By Vera Kochan

Saint Mary’s College held a three-hour evening event for students intended to relieve the stress of finals week. Advertised as “Break a Plate and blow off some finals steam,” the Dec. 9 activity had students arriving at Ferroggiaro Quad in droves.

Assistant Director of Residential Experience Fiona Corner came up with the idea about two years ago, and Smash-a-Plate has been a finals fixture each semester since. “We expect about 250 students. It’s a good study break.” (Corner was unaware of the pun she just made.)

“They use a Sharpie to write whatever they want on a plate,” Corner explained. “Sometimes they write names, sometimes certain classes that stress them out. Some have even written down the names of their professors.” The prospective plate-smashers did not take the assignment lightly. Many of them sat huddled around tables in



SMC students prepare to smash-a-plate for finals week stress relief.

Photo Vera Kochan

deep concentration making the most of identifying what gave them the greatest stress du jour in the hopes that relief was just a broken plate away.

Each student got one plate to throw. If it didn’t break, they were allowed to keep throwing it until it did. In the name of safety, protective full-facial visors were required to be worn in case shards of a broken plate flew in unexpected directions.

“We have incentives for students, such as hot cocoa, if they fill out a

survey after their experience,” said Housing Operations Manager Carolina Celis. “This gives us any suggestions or comments about the event. We found out that this ranks in the top three of student activities.”

Even with temperatures in the 40s, once the plates were broken, many students lingered in the quad to chat with friends before heading back to the dorms and their studies – hopefully with a lighter emotional load.

donate the sneakers but these people had collected sneakers from their friends, families, social networks and we even had a teacher from Fremont that made a poster to collect sneakers in her classroom.”

Those who wish to donate sneakers can still drop them off at Jackson’s dog grooming business located at 19 Orinda Way, Suite K, behind Village Pizza in Orinda.

player. “We are named ‘Dinking for Dogs’ because we get a lot of sneakers from the pickleball community and, basically, just as pickleball is ‘saving’ the seniors (humans) the sneakers we collect are ‘saving’ the senior dogs,” she said.

“We collected over 200 sneakers, but more importantly, we brought attention to Hugs for Harry,” Lee explained. “We only had about 10 people actually come to

## Moraga Public Works Director retires

... continued from Page A5

MOFD Chief Jeff Isaacs said, “It’s been an honor collaborating with someone so committed, thoughtful, and genuinely invested in making our community better,” and MPD Chief Jon King described how he met Knapp on his first day “when he walked into Town Hall, only to be met by the town manager who swooped him up and drove him to the Canyon Road Bridge to look at the slide damage.

“This began a non-stop adventure for Shawn as he led the bridge project, repair of sinkholes, the continuation of Measure K road improvements, and the development of our storm drain repair and replacement program, among other ‘duties as assigned.’ He is the consummate professional and has been dedicated to our Town. Aside from being a solid engineer and a true professional, Shawn has become a good friend, and I have enjoyed working with

him,” adding, “We have been fortunate to have him as part of our team and will definitely miss him!”

“I’ve accomplished what I’ve set out to do with a lot of interesting and amazing projects,” Knapp said. “I will miss the staff and the teamwork – working for the common goal to help the Town succeed, and I’ll miss the community that gives generously of their time. I’ve devoted much of my life to public service, and now it’s time to do projects at home.”

## Senior dog rescue in Orinda

... continued from Page A6

The shoe drive organized by Eileen Lee of Dinking for Dogs on Dec. 6 brought in over 200 shoes. Dinking for Dogs collects the donated shoes and ships them to a recycler which pays for every pair. The cash is then donated to senior dog sanctuaries. Instead of going into the landfill, donated shoes are recycled or reused. Dinking is a pickleball term, and Lee is an avid pickleball

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# Rustic Eggplant Medley a savory, sweet and smoky Mediterranean delight

By Susie Iventosch



Photo Susie Iventosch

There’s something undeniably comforting about Mediterranean cooking – those sun-kissed flavors, slow-simmered aromas, and simple ingredients that somehow create pure

magic. This week’s recipe is a celebration of that charm: a rustic eggplant dish that brings together sautéed eggplant, shallots, juicy tomatoes, and a fragrant mix of garlic,

cumin, and paprika. Finished with a generous handful of fresh cilantro, it’s the kind of dish that feels both homey and transportive – like a little bit of travel right from your own kitchen. Whether served warm with crusty bread or spooned over couscous or rice, it’s a reminder that the best meals often come from the humblest ingredients.

What really makes this dish shine are the spices – earthy cumin, smoky paprika, and a touch of garlic – a trio that gives the dish depth, warmth, and a hint of mystery. The fragrance that fills the kitchen as it all comes together is irresistible – savory, sweet, and just a little smoky.

I love this dish for its versatility. It can be served warm as a side with grilled chicken or lamb, or spooned over couscous, rice, or creamy polenta for a hearty vegetarian main. It’s also delicious at room temperature, which makes it a perfect choice for picnics or mezze-style spreads alongside hummus, olives, and warm flatbread.

A sprinkle of fresh herbs (parsley, cilantro, or basil) right before serving adds brightness, and a drizzle of extra virgin olive oil ties it all together. Simple, soulful, and full of warmth, this sautéed eggplant is the kind of dish that reminds us of why we love cooking in the first place.

## Rustic Eggplant Medley

### INGREDIENTS

- 3 tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 large shallot (coarsely diced)
- 2 cloves garlic (minced)
- 1 tsp. ground cumin
- 2 tsp. Spanish paprika
- 1 tsp. salt
- 1 large eggplant, diced
- 1 1/2 cups cherry tomatoes, halved
- 2 whole plum tomatoes (grated)
- 2 tbsp. cilantro leaves (snipped or chopped)
- 1 tsp. fresh lemon juice
- 1 tbsp. Balsamic vinegar (optional)

### DIRECTIONS

Chop shallots and mince garlic and add to 2 tbsp. olive oil in a large skillet. Cook over medium-low heat until shallots are translucent and just beginning to brown.

Meanwhile, cut ends off eggplant and cut eggplant into cubes, about 1/2-3/4-inch in size. Keep skins on the eggplant for this dish. Set aside.

Cut cherry tomatoes in half, grate the plum tomatoes on a cheese grater. Set aside.

Add spices and salt to the shallot mixture and continue to cook over medium heat for a few minutes, to bloom the spices. Add eggplant to the pan and continue to cook until eggplant is softened and edges are getting a little bit browned. Reduce heat to low.

Add cherry and grated tomatoes and simmer until tomatoes are softened and blended with eggplant and shallots. Add cilantro and lemon juice. Stir well.

At this point, you can serve right away or remove from the heat and reheat when ready to serve.



Susie can be reached at [suziventosch@gmail.com](mailto:suziventosch@gmail.com). This recipe can be found on our website: [www.lamorindaweekly.com](http://www.lamorindaweekly.com) If you would like to share your favorite recipe with Susie please contact her by email or call our office at (925) 377-0977. Or visit <https://treksandbites.com>

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# Author Terry Healey will be at January Sweet Thursday event

Submitted by Laurelle Miles

“The Resilience Mindset” by Terry Healey is about how adversity can strengthen us as individuals, as leaders and as teams by helping us learn how to build resilience, improve our self-confidence, and find greater purpose. Based on Healey’s personal story overcoming a life-threatening cancer that left him with a permanent facial difference, he also profiles others who have overcome seem-

ingly insurmountable odds, transformed themselves and are thriving today, with great purpose. Readers will walk away with coping tools to keep hope, practice gratitude, embrace change, and maintain a positive, resilient mindset.

Join Terry Healey on Jan. 15 in the DTCH at the Lafayette Library for a discussion about this book. The program is free, but registration is



Terry Healey Photo provided

required at [tinyurl.com/Jan-2026](http://tinyurl.com/Jan-2026). The doors will open at 6:30 p.m. for coffee and sweets.

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# LAMORINDA SPORTS

## Post season success for Lamorinda football

By Jon Kingdon



Miramonte quarterback Lane Dalton kneels at the conclusion of the NCS Championship game against Hayward. Photo Ann Murphy

With each Lamorinda team making it to the playoffs, Acalanes in Open/Division I, making it to the second round, Campolindo getting the No. 1 seed in Division II, also making it to the second round, it was Miramonte in Division 4 with the No. 3 seed that went on to win their NCS Championship, before losing to Calaveras in the regional finals.

**MIRAMONTE**  
Coming into the season, head coach Nick Safir was optimistic at the prospects for his team. His optimism may have been challenged with the injury to his all-league quarterback Carson Blair but that was not to be the case as the season evolved.

At the start of the season, Safir was pointing toward their rivalry games versus Acalanes and Campolindo, but would come up short in those games by a combined 13 points. “Our players have been hearing their whole careers that we’re not good enough and the other teams don’t even care about playing us. We went into the Acalanes game with a great game plan, keeping the ball away from their offense and we held them to 21 points which was the fewest points they scored in the regular season. That game was 14 to 10 with three minutes left, and it proved to our boys that they can hang with anybody.”

The Campolindo game was closer than anybody expected. “It’s been almost two decades since we beat Campolindo so we really took that one to heart and they may have underestimated us a little bit, knowing that Carson Blair was out. Our JV quarterback Lane Dalton stepped in and played really well and we only lost 25-22 and the Campolindo fans then rushed the field.” Miramonte player David Roman took that as a compliment because it showed that “the game mattered to them and it showed us respect from their fans.”

The elevation to the varsity and ultimate success of Lane Dalton was a surprise to most. “Nothing rattles Lane and that is him in a nutshell,” Safir said. “The experience starting four

games (technically five, but Dalton was injured on the third play of the NorCal game) and winning three playoff games will help him for next season. He’s going to be a really good one for us.”

Freshman Gus Millstone stepped in when Dalton was injured and led Miramonte to the first score of the game, though they ultimately lost to the ultimate state championship team, Calaveras 35-7. “Gus gave it his all with his 10 games of freshman football and I have nothing but good things to say about Gus,” Safir said. “I couldn’t be prouder of those guys.”

In the end, it was the NCS championship game against Hayward that brought the team the most satisfaction. Miramonte quickly fell behind 14-0. “Our boys never panicked and when we went into half-time tied at 14, nobody on the team doubted that we would win the game,” Safir said.

With the score 28-14 in the fourth quarter, Miramonte controlled the ball with a long final drive, running out the clock, and preventing Hayward from getting another opportunity to score.

Safir had played in and coached five NCS games and had never been on the winning side of any of those games. “It’s been something I’ve been striving for, for a long time and after coming up short last year and with all we went through this year, winning with these boys almost felt like destiny,” Safir said. “I’m going to remember this championship for a long, long time.”

Safir teaches at a middle school in Hayward and he heard a lot of abuse from the students there. “I got all these 12-year-olds talking trash to me about how Hayward’s going to kick our butt so that made the game even more satisfying for me.”

Even after Blair broke his collarbone, he still stayed involved with the team. “Carson became our de facto quarterback coach. He would sit with Lane during the QB meetings and would give him advice during the game, showing him stuff on the iPad. He was the epitome of

leadership.”

Safir spoke specifically about the seniors on the team: “I feel they can leave here feeling proud about what they accomplished.” The senior all league players for Miramonte this year were James Rogers, Andrew Bjornson (O&D), Carson Blair, Leo Wampler, David Roman, and Justin Jalowiec. “These guys and the rest of our senior class are the guys who have helped change the culture of the program and how it is going to continue to be moving forward and they’re going to remember this for the rest of their lives.”

**CAMPOLINDO**  
It was another successful season for Campolindo, finishing with a 9-3 record, losing to Clayton Valley 21-17 in the second round. This was a talented Campolindo team with 10 players making the all-league team, all seniors and one junior Ryan Erickson. Kelly Crosby was first team offense and co-MVP on defense and Micah Parker was first team offense and defense.

This was a team that played hard but was lacking one thing, according to head coach Kevin Macy: “It seemed that the only identity we had was that we did not have an identity. It seemed like I coached 12 different teams this year, but what we were able to count on was that we went out every game and played hard, fighting and scrapping our way through the season which was a testament to these kids.”

The offense had a number of weapons, according to Macy. “Everything was spread out evenly. Our QB, Reid Habas stepped in as a junior and did a commendable job for us. Everett Zellmer at wide receiver was the guy we counted on to keep drives alive on third downs. Micah Parker was very solid despite nursing a sore ankle all season and had an impressive career. Zach Tabibian did everything for us playing running back, defensive back, place kicking and kicking off.” Tabibian went from rushing for 16 yards as a junior to rushing for 436 yards as a senior.

### ACALANES

Having an undefeated regular season takes a talented team, but it was the tragic passing of Amin Noroozi who died in April from an ocean swimming accident that really brought the team together.

“Our team really had a strong connection with each other and we established our ‘why’ at the start of the season and who we were doing it for, and we said we were doing it for Amin,” junior starting quarterback Tyler Winkles said. “I feel like that really brought our team closer together, and that it pushed us to have such a great season.”

Winkles, who would go on to be named the Foothill Division co-MVP, had a slow start in the first game of the season against Archbishop Mitty: “I was very confident, but I turned the ball over a little bit in that game, but I decided to forget about it and trust the preparation I put in and we went on to win the game, and I didn’t turn the ball much after that game.”

With an undefeated regular season there were particular highlights that Winkles focused on: “It was our third game of the season against St. Ignatius (who ultimately won the Division 3-AA state championship) and our first away game. We fell behind by two scores at the end of the first half and we really felt some adversity. It was the first time that we really got kind of punched in the face but were able to come back and fight in the second half (winning

42-35). I think that was a huge turning point season, especially against a great team like St. Ignatius.”

After finishing the regular season 10-0, Acalanes was named the fourth seed in the top Division I Open section and won their first-round game against Marin Catholic 51-21. The Dons would lose their next game against Cardinal Newman 52-17 but Winkles still saw the positives in that game: “We were tied at half-time against Cardinal Newman but we made some mistakes in the second half and unfortunately lost. I think we can compete with those teams in the future, and it was a great experience playing in Division 1 for the first time.”

After the game, the head coach pointed to the future. “He thanked the seniors and said that it’s like a new era and we’ve got to keep it going,” Winkles said. “We’re going to keep playing in Division I and that’s how it’s going to be and the work for next season starts in a couple of weeks. The offseason is important and we just have to be prepared for this next year.”

Winkles is already looking ahead to the next season. “We start with morning weights in January and we’re already trying to get in the weight room as a team like before. We’re losing some key guys to graduation but I think we’re going to be set for next year with a bunch of players returning.”

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# Lamorinda girls basketball looking for continued success

By Jon Kingdon



Campolindo's Sofia Iakovleva Photo Robert Chan

## ACALANES

Having graduated a very talented senior class, Acalanes girls basketball head coach Margaret Gartner has seen her team begin the season with a 3-3 record. “Any win is nice because we didn’t know what we had. Our girls are starting to come together. With half the team new and half returning, it is kind of fun and exciting and every game is a big game for us.”

With so many new players, it has been a change for Gartner and the team’s three senior guards, Lexi Le, Cameron Thornton, and Sofia Fernandez: “It’s an adjustment for everyone, not just the coaches. Our seniors like everyone on the team are playing a different role. Lexi’s our point guard and Cameron Thornton will also be playing point guard. We’re like a re-vamped offense and our defense is a little different but you have to work with what you have and try to make the most out of them and we’re still adjusting every day.”

Gartner is going deep on her bench with four freshmen and three sophomores. With only three seniors, their leadership is crucial, led by co-captain Le: “Lexi is a great leader and the hardest worker on the team and the girls are trying to follow her lead. She definitely brings confidence to the game for everybody,”

The four freshmen are F/C Leah O’Neill, G

Leia Halvorson, G Millie Jones, and F Avery Deily are seeing significant playing time and learning on the fly. “When you think of what they did last year, playing at the Stanley School and CYO and what they’re doing now, they’re building confidence and working in practice and if there’s a situation they haven’t seen that, that’s on us and knowing that we can get better the next time,” Gartner said. “We have players that played little last season and now they’re getting playing time and we’re able to get our players rest.”

Jones won the Pinole Valley Showcase player of the game as a freshman. “Still, we have to tell her she needs to score because we’re better when she does,” Gartner said.

With such a large turnover, Gartner has made it a point to establish the team’s identity: “We do that in practice where we preach how we’re going to defense and not give up on plays. It’s all new to our new players and I expect our five returners to do it and the others will follow. We have to push a little, but can’t get too caught up with the mistakes because that is just part of the game, so if we can keep our cool as coaches we have a shot.”

As the year develops, Gartner is looking for constant improvement: “We should get better developing the chemistry of the team, chang-

ing from one defense to another and calling set plays and spacing better on offense. Our seniors are talking on the court and that is something we want everyone on the team to do because if they’re not talking, we’re going to make mistakes like leaving somebody wide open so that should clean up along with boxing out better.”

## CAMPOLINDO

The first two years head coach Doug Cardoni has coached Campolindo, they have shown constant success. Taking over a 9-17 team, the team was 15-15 and last season was 18-12 and advanced to the second round of the playoffs and has seen growth in the numbers of the girls trying out, from 18 his first season to 33 this year, and has won four of their first six games.

With the graduation of their starting guards Ally McCauley and Raegen Shum, the Cougars will be more team oriented. “Not relying on Ally and Raegen, our offense is going to be more egalitarian and faster paced and I believe we will score more points this year.”

Senior Sofia Iakovleva will be starting in the post. “Sofia really worked hard this off-season and can be a real force inside,” Cardoni said. “Everyone else is a ball handler. We don’t have any set plays and we’ve been working on ball handling for three years and so whoever gets the ball can just go. Any of nine players could be our leading scorer any game. I think we have some players that are going to put up numbers that will surprise some people because they’ve worked so hard on their games and they’re really starting to trust themselves. I really like to see his team push the ball up the floor because “it’s easier to score against less than five people.”

This is a veteran team with a solid core of upperclassmen, two sophomores and one freshman. The offense is led by senior co-captain guards Tori Gilbert, Becca Tanner, junior co-captain Jenna Chan, and senior Avery Yasukochi. “Tori is a four-year starter and scored 26 points in our opening game. She does every-

thing on the court, scoring, rebounding, defending, and handling the ball,” Cardoni said. “Becca really came on last year and has taken the reins in creating stuff for herself and her teammates. Avery, a competitive swimmer who may be the strongest player on our team, has devoted herself solely to basketball this year and her improvement has been pretty remarkable and has just been fun to coach. Jenna, who has been a starter from day one, is a fearless player who can shoot, drive, defend, improved her ball handling and has a real motor which is a skill that she has in spades.”

The one freshman on the team, Mackinsey Lee, is also splitting time with the soccer team. “Mackinsey may be the quickest person on the team and doesn’t play like a freshman,” Cardoni said. “She’s a great athlete that stays composed and has a high IQ on the court.

Juniors Natalia Jaramillo, Jeevan Dhaliwal, and Kyle Pearlstein will also see significant playing time, according to Cardoni. “Natalia may be our best all-round defender. Jeevan showed great improvement over the summer and Kyle is very talented but just needs to stay healthy this year.”

Sophomore Addison Davis, who was brought up to the varsity last year is someone that Cardoni feels is going to contribute this year as well, one advantage being that she is left-handed and can be hard to cover.

Last season, Campolindo gave up fewer than 50 points in 24 games and Cardoni is getting more of the same this year, giving up an average of 35.8 points per game. “We like to play really aggressive, in your face man defense. “When you look at our team and our size, you might not think we’re the most stout defensive team, but we will give a lot of people trouble by playing good, hard defense.”

## MIRAMONTE

As a rule, bringing in a new head coach requires an adjustment time for the coach and the team. However, for

Miramonte’s new head coach Ace Wright, it was uncharacteristically easy since Wright was Miramonte’s head JV coach since 2021 and an assistant varsity coach since 2023, with the team starting the season winning four of their first seven games.

After seven games, Wright has learned a lot about her team: “We’re a team that is going to get out and compete and play hard, no matter the scoreboard. I love that because you can’t coach toughness or effort, so that’s all you need to get a team riled up and going.”

Despite losing some key players to graduation, there is a core of sophomores in Lorelei Keenan, who was the team’s second leading scorer and leading rebounder, Ally Rogin and Freida Vierra who played almost every game and got valuable experience. “As freshmen, they were able to learn from the upperclassmen and their improvement and confidence has really grown from last year,” Wright said. “They know that I trust them to get the job done as they already know our system and know me.”

Wright is still looking to make the team in her image: “With new players and differing talent, I want us to be more of an aggressive defensive team, where we are pressing more and playing five-on-five defense. Offensively, I just want them to get out there and ball out. We

have a couple of sets that we will run but other than that I just want them to read the plays and the defense and go from there.”

Co-captain guards, senior Maegan Eichenberger and junior Annelise Lindberg are the leaders on the court. “Maegan and Annelise will be playing most of each game. They are the key to our winning games. Amy can rotate in and out at different positions. Maegan has been on the varsity since she was a freshman so I trust her with the ball in her hands.”

While waiting for transfers Allie Curran and Ava Noga to become eligible, freshman guard Anika Vasisht is going to get a lot of playing time. “Anika can shoot the ball pretty well and has a lot of energy, hustling on offense and defense, getting used to the different pace of varsity basketball.”

With the team giving up an average of 34.1 points per game, Wright will be consistently looking for the team to elevate their game as the year progresses: “I’m looking to improve on a defensive end. If we can really home in and be an aggressive defensive team, we should be good in the years to come, especially with our height with Rogin (6’1”) and Curran (6’2”). Their presence will be great for us with blocks and deflections.”

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## Water polo NHS championship

..continued from Page A1

The post-season was just about how Miramonte and Holland designed it. “Winning the league tournament against Sacred Heart by a single goal 11-10 and then winning the North Coast Championship again over Campolindo 15-7 was huge.”

Holland did not hesitate to acknowledge the Sacred Heart team and was as quick to sing the praises of his team: “Obviously it was a tough ending and a great game with Sacred Heart and the boys just played some great water polo against a talented and well coached team by Brian Kreutzkamp and it was a heartbreaker to lose on a shot with one second to go. (In fact, that that second was the only time that Sacred Heart had led the entire game). I’m really proud of their effort and the loss does not take away

from a great season for sure.”

Holland spoke from the heart when he addressed the team after the loss: “I let them know how our whole staff was really proud of them and how hard they worked this year. That’s sports and how you love sports and you play for these types of games and to be in those moments. You can play a great game and have it not come your way. That was essentially my message to the team. I told them not to hang their heads and that they should be really proud of the special season we had.”

Miramonte’s final record of 24-7 does not by itself talk about how competitive the water polo teams are in the area. The last five losses for Miramonte were all by one goal. “Northern California Water Polo is definitely in a good spot and it’s really competitive,” Holland said. “We

also had some great wins over Oaks Christian and Corona del Mar, teams that made their CIF semifinals in Southern California.”

Seniors Tristan Tucker was named the league MVP; Brock Bliss was first team all-league and Jackson Cherry second team all-league. Juniors Brady Hasset and Trent Smith were first team all-league and Griff Maclear was second team all-league and sophomore Mason Tunney was also second team all-league. Having averaged 14 goals a game, all but Jackson Cherry were offensive players and though all were well deserving for the honor, Holland felt that his defense was overlooked.

“Our defense was massively important and they improved throughout the season. We knew we could score goals and our goalies, particularly junior Zavi Ryder im-

proved a lot through the season. As a former goalie myself (Olympian), that was a big point of emphasis for our team and we held Newport Harbor, the top-rated team in the nation, to six goals, their lowest goal output since 2019. Their improvement through the season was a huge reason we were so successful.”

Though graduating 13 seniors, there were 14 juniors and sophomores on the roster to build on for next season, according to Holland. “It is going to be tough to be losing such talented players but we have a really good, younger group, a lot of juniors and a top sophomore class many of whom are defensive players which will help next season,” he said. “We’re going to be in a great spot to hopefully come back and be stronger next year and that’s our mentality.”



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# MHS junior spearheads schoolwide toy drive for Winter Nights children

Noah Thaler, a junior at Miramonte High School in Orinda and president of the school's Jewish Student Union, collaborated with the Christian F.A.I.T.H club and Muslim Student Association for a student run toy drive to benefit children participating in the Winter Nights' Family Shelter, which offers homeless families shelter during the cold fall and winter months. The drive, garnering support from staff on campus, such as teachers who serve as club advisors and the staff who run the school's Wellness Center, filled three large card boxes with gifts (plus a few that didn't fit) for the children. Thaler noted gifts such as toys, books, clothes, or art supplies were specifically requested. "When I saw the boxes on campus filled with donations, I was so proud of my school for coming together to support the local community. I was appreciative that so many students took time out of their day to make a difference," he said. For the families, he hopes they come away recognizing the community cares about them, and they are not alone. "I hope they feel the support of not only the Miramonte students, but the many staff, families, and neighbors who came together for them." – D. Scholz



Photo USTA Staff

# The Saklan School Welcomes Generations for Heartwarming Celebration

Submitted by Emily Williamson



Grandfriends join Saklan School students for fun activities on Nov. 21. Photo provided

The Saklan School campus in Moraga was filled with joy, laughter, and heartfelt moments Nov. 21 as students welcomed grandparents, family friends, and other special adults for the school's annual Grandfriends' Day celebration. The event highlighted the power of intergenerational connection and showcased the vibrant, student-centered learning that defines Saklan. The morning began with an all-school assembly, where students shared their voices, creativity, hard work, and compassion. Guests had the opportunity to see firsthand the projects, performances, and learning experiences that shape student life at Saklan. Following the assembly, grandfriends joined students in their classrooms for hands-on activities designed to spark curiosity and deepen connection. Visitors collaborated on art projects, explored math and science challenges, joined in reading and writing activities, and experienced the rhythms of a typical school day. Classrooms buzzed with excitement as students proudly introduced their grandfriends to teachers and peers and shared their work and routines. "The magic of Grandfriends' Day isn't just about the activities—it's about the relationships," the school shared. "When students see someone they love and trust engaging with their school world, it strengthens their sense of belonging and builds confidence, curiosity, and community."

The Saklan School extends heartfelt gratitude to all who attended and helped make the day so meaningful. The presence of grandfriends enriches students' educational journeys in ways that last long beyond the event itself.

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