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## The Fabric of Families

By Sophie Braccini

What do Jesse Jackson, Leo Tolstoy and Steve Jobs have in common? They were adopted children. Adoption is no longer a family secret, but continues to be a delicate issue that touches upon primal emotions. To guide adopting and birth parents during the process there is a Lafayette law firm where the two partners, Diane Michelsen and Megan Cohen, have lived the process personally; one adopted children, the other gave her first born up for adoption. Today their firm, Family Formation, claims to have completed more than 5000 adoptions.

"Over ten years ago we decided to adopt a second child because I could not get pregnant after my first child was born," says Orinda resident Mindy Becker. "We worked with Diane Michelsen, and this changed my life so much that when I recently decided to go back to work I looked for a position in the adoption/foster family field."

Today Becker works as a case manager for Family Formation. She describes the process she and her husband went through as a smooth one, in which they felt listened to and respected in their choice. "I did my homework," she says, "There are different avenues to go about adopting a child. But after hearing Diane (Michelsen) give a presentation and starting to build a rapport with her, we decided to work with her law firm."

Family Formation not only performs all the legal work pertaining to an adoption process, they are also able, through the network they've created over the years with hospitals, social workers and referrals, to locate babies who will

be placed for adoption. Michelsen indicates that the delay to find a match between an adopting family and a birth parent varies from a few weeks to about six months. "We started working with Diane in May of 2000 and had our baby in October of that year," says Becker, who sends a yearly letter and pictures to the birth mother.

Megan Cohen found her way to becoming the second partner of Family Formation from her counterpart role in the adoption equation. As a 20-year-old college student she decided that she could not raise her first born son and found Michelsen to help her along the way.

"I later became a high school English teacher, got married and had two other children," says Cohen, "then I decided to go back to law school to work in the adoption field. When I got my degree I contacted Diane and we decided to work together." The adoption of Cohen's child was, like Becker's, an open adoption process, meaning that the birth mother and the adopting parents meet each other and decide on the level of interaction they want to have.

Michelsen, who is an adopting parent herself, is very passionate about open adoption. "The desire for secrecy is based in fear," she believes, "and if parents are afraid, the children will feel it. It is not healthy."

Another important part of Family Formation's practice is the facilitation of surrogate pregnancies. Surrogacy is a technique through which a woman bears a child for a couple that cannot do so themselves. There are two types of surrogacy, traditional and gestational. The traditional form involves the surrogate mother



The staff of Family Formation enjoys a holiday party

Photo Sophie Braccini

providing the ova – Family Formation does not deal with this type of procreation. For a gestational surrogacy, the intended family provides the embryo that is implanted in the surrogate's uterus. "Under California case law, the surrogate is bound to a contract," explains Michelsen, "the intended parents who provided the genetic material are parents from birth."

According to Cohen, parents who choose that route rather than adoption are those who want more control over the process. It is also more costly since the surrogate is compensated. "Being a surrogate is not for everyone," ac-

knowledges Cohen, "but the first motivation of these women is to help others form a family. They often also have financial needs." The screening process is part of Family Formation's services. "We work on 20 to 25 such cases per year," says the lawyer, "and we always find surrogates. We are not about volume, we build families, one at a time."

Lamorinda Weekly business articles are intended to inform the community about local business activities, not to endorse a particular company, product or service.

## business briefs

### Numia Offers Free Accounting Software for Small Businesses www.Numia.biz

Nicholas Gerber, who made a name for himself as a candidate in the US Senate election of 2008, is now offering a free, 'in-the-cloud', accounting software for small businesses. "Anyone can access our site at numia.biz, create a company and start using our software for free," says Gerber, "an unlimited number users from the same company can be located on different continents, they can be given access to see or edit all or part of the data, that are always available 'in the cloud'." "The National Association of Accountants does not endorse 'cloud-accounting' for security reasons," notes local CPA Kathy Macchi, "but as security improves, that position might change." "We chose to have our server in England because the privacy laws are better there, the data is encrypted too; it's an 'https' address," says Gerber. Right now Numia is for service-based business, not retail, Gerber adds, "Still, we already have 3000 clients, 1/3 in India, 1/3 in United States and the last third in the rest of the world."

### New Sales Associate at Coldwell Banker, Orinda Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage 5 Moraga Way, Orinda (925) 253-4600

Coldwell Banker announced that Chad Morrison has joined the company as a sales associate in its Orinda office. In his new position, Morrison will specialize in residential sales throughout the East Bay. Prior to joining Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage, Morrison was president of the real estate development company, C.E.M Development Inc. He recently completed an intensive training program through Allied, which emphasized the principles and techniques of real estate. Morrison may be reached directly at (925) 253-4650 or via email at Chad.Morrison@camoves.com.

### News from the three Chambers of Commerce Lafayette



Jay Lifson, in the Santa mobile, launches the 3/50 Shop Local campaign at La Fiesta Square. Photo Robin Fox

Lafayette 3/50 campaign was launched by Executive Director Jay Lifson on Sunday December 11, in Santa's own car, along the streets of Lafayette's business district. Residents were handed cards on which they could pledge to spend \$50 in at least three different local businesses during the holiday season, then send their receipts to the Chamber before January 6th to be entered in the "Thanks for Shopping Lafayette Raffle" – the grand prize is a \$500 gift card. "Driving in Santa's Lafayette caravan was fun," said Social Media Coach and Chamber volunteer Robin Fox, who accompanied Lifson in the back of the GTO convertible. "People on the street were surprised. We waved. Cars honked. Then, when we pulled into La Fiesta Square, what looked like a birthday party suddenly emerged. The kids saw Santa in the red and white Nash and broke into smiles.

All fun!" Contact the Chamber for information, (925) 284-7404, 100 Lafayette Circle, Suite 103, Lafayette, CA 94549.

### Moraga

The Chamber of Commerce needs help. In 2011 your Moraga Chamber of Commerce brought to its Membership instructional, interactive lectures, educational seminars and forums, great booth participation at Town-sponsored events and enjoyable mixers complete with music, food, beverage and great networking opportunities. As the Chamber moves into 2012, it needs everyone to find an event/program to volunteer, even if only for an hour. Contact [kathe@moragachamber.org](mailto:kathe@moragachamber.org).

Free Holiday Wrapping at 5A-Rent-A-Space: December 1st through the 23rd, Santa's Secret Wrapping Room at 5A Rent-A-Space features everything you need from tables and chairs, lots of colorful wrapping paper, ribbons and tape. What to do with the kids? Bring them along! There will be fun coloring and crafts to keep them busy.

### Orinda

Mark your 2012 calendar: The Chamber's Orinda Country Club Luncheon is scheduled for Friday, February 24, noon to 1:30pm at the Orinda Country Club, 315 Camino Sobrante. The cost is \$30 per person. The luncheon's speaker will be award-winning weekend anchor for NBC Bay Area News, and Orinda resident, Diane Dwyer.

If you have a business brief to share, please contact **Sophie Braccini** at [sophie@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:sophie@lamorindaweekly.com)

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