

Published November 21st, 2012

Creating Community through Conversations in French and Italian

By Laurie Snyder



Nicole Collins teaches exclusively at the Orinda Community Center. From left: Jerry Merrill, Gerry Azaro, Nicole Collins, and Margaret Mahoney. Photo Ohlen Alexander

others are professionals hoping to develop Italian or French skills to help them succeed in the corporate world, or native French and Italian speakers wanting to maintain their language skills while living among their English-speaking neighbors.

"Basically, my class is a brain gym," she says. Participants "just want to keep their brains elastic and ready to go." Her oldest student is 89.

Her classes are also very popular with travelers. Having the skills to get out of hotel rooms to interact with new people, catch a train, hop on a bus at the spur of the moment, or even just sit in a quiet cafe in a quaint town somewhere soaking up the atmosphere while bantering with local residents has helped learners like professional photographer Ohlen Alexander to become even more outgoing than usual.

Several have told Collins, "This has been on my bucket list." While researching family histories, others have met cousins, forming new bonds that only a common language can provide. Collins will even help students interested in genealogy to help translate census records, old letters, and other documents uncovered in their research.

Small study groups form, classmates get together at the coffee shop below the Orinda Library, friends are made. Says Bobby Deibert, "The French IV class with Nicole Collins is the highlight of my week. We have a wonderful group of very interesting people and Nicole is a great and talented professor."

"It's become a little community," says Collins. "We have movie nights." They even organize potluck dinners and holiday parties at each other's homes. "A lot of my students come back year after year - so I have to make it fun for them. It keeps me on my toes - it keeps my lessons fresh."

Collins and her students also keep in touch via email and Facebook. No textbook purchase is required. Best of all, there are no grades or tests - just a little bit of friendly competition between study buddies. Although she hopes for fluency from her students, Collins realizes that this is not always the goal for the participants in her classes. "All it takes is to have just a little bit of a language," she says.

New sessions start in January. For details, visit www.nicolelanguage.com.

Nicole Collins is a gardener - but not in the sense one usually imagines. Collins is a gardener of dreams.

A native French and Italian speaker, she was born in Milan and moved with her family to France when she was 14. Eventually, she met her husband - a Californian - and moved to Orinda in the early 1990s. While raising her daughter, she began building her reputation as one of the most rare of teachers - one who is able to coax students out of their shells to not only enjoy the subjects they are studying, but to try things they thought were impossible.

Collins, who holds a degree in comparative literature, has been presenting conversation classes at the Orinda Community Center since her earliest Lamorinda days. So beloved by her students, she now teaches beginning through advanced level Italian and French year round. "My mission is to create a friendly and relaxed experience for people to learn or brush-up on French or Italian, the way these languages are spoken today," she says. Fall, winter, and spring sessions are 10 to 12 weeks long; summer sessions, five to six weeks.

Many of her pupils come from as far away as Marin; others are from Berkeley, Danville, and Rossmoor. "At the moment, I have three language teachers in my class," she says. Physicians and opera buffs are also big enrollees; still

Reach the reporter at: laurie@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA