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## Rheem Theatre: The Community Mobilizes

By Sophie Braccini



Two Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School students baked for two days to raise money for the theater. Photo provided

Thanks to strong community support, as of last week the Rheem Theatre was well on its way to raising the money necessary to order the lift it needs to re-open the upper floor theaters and be compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act, according to Derek Zemrak of the California Independent Film Festival Association which operates the theater.

Support for this unique recreation venue was swift. In the span of two weeks, individuals, businesses and organizations have raised thousands of dollars.

"Individuals have been writing big checks," said Zemrak. Neighborhood Computer gave \$1,000, the Zemrak family gave \$2,500 and Moraga resident Cliff Dochterman, who is the town's representative to the County Council on Aging, gave \$1,000. "You can't ask people to donate if you do not do it yourself," he said.

Dochterman started a campaign he calls "Let's Give Moraga a Lift" and is soliciting residents, businesses and service clubs, such as the Rotary. "The theater is a major recreation facility for Moraga," added Dochterman.

It was a letter by Dochterman pinpointing the lack of access to the upper floor that led Zemrak to close the non-accessible floors. Dochterman wants to be part of the solution because he believes this kind of effort underscores the unique quality of the Moraga community.

An example of this was a bake sale organized by two Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School students, Kellen Kvech and Ally Scarpitti, who baked for two days and set up a table at the corner of Arroyo and Sullivan Drive Jan. 20 to raise money for the lift.

"Ally and I went into the theater to get my mom some popcorn and found out all the upstairs theaters were closed due to the elevator lift," said Kvech. "We saw the donation box and how much money people were donating and I decided it would be a good idea to have a bake sale. It's so nice to have a place locally where kids can be with their friends. Some of my favorite memories are with my cousins and I watching movies in the theater and waking my Grandma up during the movie."

"I have been going there since I was little and don't want to see it close down again," added Scarpitti. The two friends baked soft pretzels and cup cakes and raised \$170 the first weekend. They plan another sale next weekend.

On Jan. 18 Shelby's restaurant in Orinda gave 15 percent of the night's revenue to the theater. "We were immediately supportive of the Rheem when we heard about the issue," said Carlos Rangel, owner of Shelby's. "As small business owners we know the challenge that ADA compliance can pose and we wanted to show solidarity."

Patrons from both Moraga and Orinda crowded the Theatre Square restaurant that night, resulting in a check for \$1,000 made to the theater. Shelby's is also supporting the 'Oscar Night' at the Rheem by supplying dinner for the Feb. 24 event.

A fundraising shred event is scheduled at the 5A Rent-A-Space parking lot at Moraga Road from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Feb 16. "We are partnering with Peggy Hall of Hall of Taxes and Grant Stubblefield of Neighborhood Computers who will also be volunteering," said 5A manager Brad Noggle. "Donations are \$5 per bankers' box for paper shredding and additional donations are welcome." Noggle hopes to raise between \$2,000 and \$5,000 on the day of the event.

And the Moraga Art Gallery asked artist members to create unique six-by-six inch pieces that will be raffled. Raffle tickets are \$20 for five, and all the proceeds will go to the theater.

Zemrak continues to focus on the long-term future of the Rheem. There are additional needs coming up for the theater: one bathroom needs to be brought to ADA compliance, and two more digital projectors have to be purchased.

"If we have the right attitude and hold the vision, we will do it," said Edy Schwartz, Chamber of Commerce liaison to the Lamorinda Theatres. Zemrak is also engaged in negotiations with property owner Mike Puri because, although the lease does not end for another year, he wants to have a long-term contract to plan for the future.

"The Orinda Theatre is doing very well and so did the Rheem until we had to close the upstairs, better than they had done in more than 10 years," said Zemrak. "I'm reasonably optimistic for the future."

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