

Published November 5th, 2014

Making a Difference: Orinda's Mark Roberts on the Value of Volunteerism

By Laurie Snyder



Mark Roberts

"If you're not volunteering, you're missing an opportunity to feel really good," observes Mark Roberts. The chair of Orinda's Traffic Safety Advisory Committee, Roberts also currently serves on the board of directors for the Orinda Community Foundation (orindafoundation.org), which was formed in 2010 to enhance Orindans' quality of life "by encouraging philanthropy, building partnerships and providing financial assistance to support community activities, beautification and the arts."

A professional fundraising consultant for small, faith-based organizations and other nonprofits by day, Roberts has also been a member of the California Autism Foundation's board of directors for the past six years and now serves as its president. "I just really appreciate what the foundation has been doing to help people with autism and their families. Many autism groups that do great work are focused on early diagnosis, but CAF provides honest-to-goodness programs for families, including a work program and an array of day programs for adults as well as programs for

kids in school. There are folks served by CAF programs who are in their 50s and 60s. It's been a very gratifying learning experience."

But Roberts' name and face are perhaps even better known to Lamorindans as the former president of the Orinda Association (orindaassociation.org) during the late 1990s and from his service, about a decade ago, as the Lamorinda community liaison for the late Gayle Uilkema, the beloved former Contra Costa County Supervisor. "I attended all of the mayors' liaison meetings, not just in Orinda, but in Lafayette and Moraga as well. It makes me feel good when I can help groups make connections."

Roberts and his wife, Claire, were inspired to work for the civic good largely by fellow Santa Maria parishioner Gail Cwalina, a longtime community volunteer who passed away in 2010. "Claire and I don't have any kids. So when we moved to Orinda in the early 1990s, we didn't have that same society introduction that most Orindans have - through the schools. For us, we joined Santa Maria Church, and that's how we got involved with the volunteering scene."

It was Cwalina, in fact, who encouraged Roberts to join the board of the Orinda Association. The Orinda Volunteer Center, founded in 2002, now offers a volunteer guide and community calendar on the Orinda Association's website filled with short-term and ongoing opportunities for everything from the Orinda Baseball Association (obabaseball.com) to the Lamorinda Sunrise Rotary's Home Team (rotaryhometeam.com), which changes those hard-to-reach cathedral ceiling light bulbs for seniors so that they won't need to risk falls while climbing on ladders.

Like Cwalina, he's always on the lookout for ways to engage his neighbors, and is currently urging Orindans to consider applying for one of the four vacancies on the Traffic Safety Advisory Committee. "Many of our roads were built in the 1950s when vehicular traffic was lighter, and weren't really designed with the idea of having pedestrian and vehicles co-exist. So, one of the things that we worked on early in my TSAC tenure was a project identifying which streets are most

heavily used by pedestrians and bicyclists and ways to enhance the safety of everyone - drivers, walkers and cyclists."

Over the years, TSAC members have worked with residents and the Orinda City Council to address unique traffic concerns of individual neighborhoods. Roads have been restriped and signs have been installed - as have speed bumps. "There's a voting process. If something like speed cushions are going to be installed, they have to be approved by the homeowners or those near by the areas. Being able to help people find common ground is one of the best parts of being a TSAC member. It's truly an accomplishment when neighbors get their traffic calming measures approved."

One of his ultimate hopes is to make it safer for children in Orinda to walk to school - particularly those in the elementary grades. "The biggest challenge we face when working with groups of residents is figuring out how to change driver behavior. We can create traffic calming measures like no left turn signs on Moraga Way near Ivy Drive, but then we have moms or dads who, while they're concerned with the safety of their own kids, seem to put the concerns of other kids and drivers aside if they're running late. We all need to adopt an attitude towards being concerned for the safety of others. Watch out for the other guy, and remember the three Cs: consideration, courtesy and common sense."

And as for volunteering, observes Roberts, "Getting involved in some capacity makes you feel like you're an important member of the community. We all live in Orinda and care about making it better. So if you have a concern or just want to see how other neighborhoods are dealing with issues, come on down and sit in on a meeting. We meet on the third Monday each month.

Orinda Needs YOU!

City asks Orindans to volunteer for commissions and committees

Orinda City Clerk Michele Olsen has announced that the city is seeking applications from residents to serve as volunteers for an array of advisory bodies which give Orindans a voice on a host of quality of life issues from community beautification to roads maintenance.

For more information see the ad on this page and visit the city's website, www.cityororinda.org.

Reach the reporter at: laurie@lamorindaweekly.com

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