

Business

# Lessons Learned From A Major Disaster

By Sophie Braccini



Fire at Sam Clar Furniture in Concord on Nov. 26, 2015

Seeing one's business go up in smoke can be a terrible blow, but that is exactly what happened to Moraga resident John Schwartz and his family on Thanksgiving night last November when fire broke out at Sam Clar Furniture in Concord. Fortunately, Schwartz was well prepared and insured, so a long-term catastrophe was avoided and Sam Clar is now moving seamlessly into 2016.

This was not the first time fire has struck the Schwartz family. Sam Clar offices located in Oakland caught fire 40 years ago, after Schwartz's father, Jeff Schwartz, took over the business from his father. The business was originally started in 1939 by Jeff Schwartz's grandfather. "The lessons learned back then and that had been ingrained in me saved us the second time around," said John Schwartz.

On that Thanksgiving night, as dessert was about to be served, Schwartz got a phone call from one of his employees telling him there

was a fire in their Concord offices. "I immediately jumped in my car and reached the freeway, hoping that it would just be a small fire outside the structure," he said. But as he approached his exit on 680, Schwartz saw the heavy plumes of dark smoke blocking the sky: not good.

The Concord firefighters were already at work, with two fire trucks on site. "The building was 20,000 square feet, divided into three sections," explained Schwartz. "At the center was the warehouse that was full of merchandise ready to ship, the showroom on one side, and the corporate offices on the other side." The fire started and was contained in the middle section; two firewalls insulated the other two sections.

"I got in touch with the fire captain," said Schwartz, "and asked him how fast I could get our computers, which are the brains of the company." Sam Clar designs, procures, installs and services office furniture around

the world. Ten percent of the sales come from the showroom, 90 percent from contracts with clients. The information system is at its core, and even if the company had outside backups, Schwartz knew that getting his servers would insure the smoothest possible recovery.

"In the meantime, my family, parents, children, siblings and employees had been checking the local TV news stations and had seen the images that were quite impactful. Everyone came to help," said Schwartz. Once the firefighters gave him the OK, Schwartz got into his office with his older son, his director of operations, and two firefighters, and they started removing the business servers. "It's a good thing that the computers were installed in towers that set them off the floor," he said, "because by the time we got in, there was already six inches of water in the office." All of his corporate documents were stored in fire files. Schwartz, his family and



From left: John Schwartz in his home office, with sons Trent and Ethan

Photo Sophie Braccini

employees left by 11 p.m. "The fire was contained by then," he said. "The roof caved in around 1 a.m. Luckily, no one was hurt." The entire building was uninhabitable due to the smoke and water damage.

The next morning, Schwartz met with his managers and the information technology and phone providers. The servers were transferred to the IT consultant, Endsight, to run the system through their office, which, coupled with phone lines, got Sam Clar back in business, though in a reduced capacity. "We were able to have the emails running on Saturday and to take some business calls on Monday," he said. Schwartz found a place to rent at 2500 Visso Lane in Concord. By Dec. 10, less than one month after the fire, the business and all the 28 employees were back working at 85 percent capacity, mostly from home at first. The warehouse reopened on Dec. 15.

"There were a few steps that were critical," explained Schwartz. "First, I learned from my father that when the insurance broker comes to walk you through the coverage, you pay attention (and make sure) that everything is accurate." The insurance company he works with, Uniguard, offers a policy that covers everything, including business interruption cov-

erage tied to the current level of what the business is, lost profits, getting into new spaces, rebuilding, and potential business loss. "I also hired a public adjuster to negotiate with the insurance companies, a process that can last six to eight months."

As far as emotional stress is concerned, Schwartz believes that he was able to keep calm through it all because he focused on the practical aspects of going through the crisis, and not on the years of personal and family history that were lost. He acknowledges that there was a shock, for his wife Julianne who works for the company, his sons, his parents Edy and Jeff Schwartz, and the employees.

"The silver lining of the fire is that we have the opportunity to redesign our operations, to rethink everything from the ground up," said Schwartz. "We will probably increase our use of shared documents and have our information system off the premises." He added that it has been gratifying and humbling to see the people he works with, including employees, clients and suppliers, stepping up and dealing with relatively large adversity.

*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

### Cine Cuvée Opens in Orinda

4 Theater Square, Orinda - (925) 254-9065

The first Orinda lounge and wine bar celebrated its grand opening on the evening of Friday, Jan. 8. The establishment is located next to the movie theater and is owned by the theater's operators. The wine bar had been a long time coming, the planning process proving to be much longer than anticipated. But it did not stop those who came to the celebration from having a very good time. (See story on page A6.)

### New Pediatric Dentistry Opens in Lafayette

Lamorinda Tooth Buds - 3501 School Street, Lafayette

www.lamorindatoothbuds.com - (925) 385-8051

Dr. Barnali (Bonnie) Roy is opening a new pediatric dentistry office in Lafayette. She grew up in Southern California and obtained her doctor of dental surgery (DDS) degree from Columbia University College of Dental Medicine where she was honored with an award for Academic Excellence in Pediatric Dentistry. During dental school, Dr. Roy realized her passion for working with children. She completed a postdoctoral residency program in pediatric dentistry at Columbia University-New York Presbyterian Hospital. During residency, she gained extensive experience working with children with special healthcare needs, craniofacial anomalies, interceptive orthodontics, and treatment with IV and oral sedation. Dr. Roy is board-certified by the American Board of Pediatric Dentistry, she is an assistant professor at the UCSF School of Dentistry, and she also serves as a committee member on the California Society of Pediatric Dentistry. Each year, Dr. Roy participates in global mission trips to help provide dental care to children in various underserved parts of the world.



Dr. Barnali (Bonnie) Roy  
Photo provided

### Lafayette Tennis Club and Living Lean Launch Party

3125 Camino Diablo, Lafayette  
2 Theater Square, Orinda

www.livingleanprogram.com

The launch party of the new Lafayette Tennis/Living Lean partnership took place on Jan. 8 with healthy

gourmet, living-lean approved food. The class schedule for both the Lafayette and Orinda locations was released and people started to join. The transformation of the Lafayette club into a high-end, Living Lean Fitness Complex, similar to the Orinda location but on a much grander scale with a boxing, circuit room, spinning studio, TRX, personal training gym and yoga, is scheduled for completion within six months. Combined tennis and fitness memberships will be available at the remodeled location. For more information, contact Sheena Lakhota at (925) 360-7051.

### News from the three Chambers of Commerce, Lafayette

Business Issues Forum (formerly the Entrepreneurs' Club) at 8 a.m. Friday, Jan. 22 in the Chamber Conference Room.

Green Committee Meeting at noon Tuesday, Jan. 26 in the Chamber Conference Room.

Business Persons of the Year Dinner and State of the City Address at 6 p.m. Friday, Jan. 29 at the Lafayette Park Hotel and Spa, 3287 Mt. Diablo Blvd. For reservations, visit <http://www.lafayettechamber.org/event/2016-business-persons-of-the-year-dinner/>. (See story on page A3.)

### Moraga

Moraga Business and Community Symposium features four distinguished panelists who will discuss various trends and influences on the Moraga business community at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday, Jan. 19 during a free event at the Saint Mary's College Soda Center. (See story on page A4.)

### Orinda

Save the date for the Awards and Recognition Luncheon at noon on Friday, Feb. 12 at the Orinda Country Club. Outgoing president Sylvia Jorgensen, and retiring executive director Candy Kattenburg will be recognized. Five chamber awards will be presented to the Business Person of the Year, the Small Business of the Year, the New Business of the Year, the Chamber Member of the Year and the Ambassador of the Year. For reservations, visit [Orindachamber.org](http://Orindachamber.org).

If you have a business brief to share, please contact [storydesk@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:storydesk@lamorindaweekly.com)

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