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Marechal Duncan - the heart of Lafayette history

By Pippa Fisher



Marechal Duncan at the Historical Society in February 2019. Photo provided

Lafayette lost a beloved member of the community with the recent passing of Marechal Duncan at age 98.

It wasn't just that his many years of volunteerism, benefiting many different organizations have made the community a much better place, although they have, but it is the man himself - his wit, his charm, and his humor - who touched so many lives, that so many will miss.

"Marechal enlivened every event he organized and attended, and that included a large number of events," says Former Mayor Don Tatzin. "With a calm manner, Marechal earned the fondness and commanded the respect of citizens because he knew what he was talking about, brought good ideas, and was kind and courteous to everyone."

Duncan was recognized for his many areas of community service by being named Lafayette Citizen of the Year in 2015.

Born in 1922 in Massachusetts, at 1 year old he moved with his family to San Diego, where he grew up, joining the navy following his high school graduation. After Pearl Harbor he served in the Guadalcanal campaign. He earned numerous medals and citations including three Bronze Stars.

Duncan attended the University of California at Berkeley and later earned an MBA from Pepperdine University. He went on to work for several companies including Motorola for 28 years.

He married Doris Paulson in 1947, and together they moved to Lafayette in 1955, buying a house in the Silver Springs neighborhood. He threw himself into community involvement, serving as an LMYA coach, and a Scout leader with Troop 204 while their children were young.

He was a founding member of the Lafayette Community Foundation where he established the group's Liaison Committee for Seniors. A true history buff, with a love for Lafayette's historic fire truck Old Betsy, he served from 1991 until 2019 on the Lafayette Historical Society board, and he co-chaired the Lafayette Sesquicentennial celebration. Additionally he was a founding member of the original Lafayette Toastmaster's Club and was a past president of the Silver Springs Homeowners Association. He was a member of SIRS Branch 8 and a Master Mason. Duncan served on Lafayette's Open Space Task Force and the Senior Needs Assessment Committee.

"Marechal was the embodiment of what it means to Love Lafayette," says Mary McCosker, executive director of the Lafayette Historical Society. "During his life he was involved in so many activities that benefited so many parts of the community." And McCosker adds that he was always such a charming, friendly person with a dry sense of humor and a twinkle in his eye.

Former Mayor Anne Grodin who was, with Duncan, one of the founders of the Lafayette Community Foundation, explains how Duncan became involved in an ad hoc committee formed back in 1997 to brainstorm ideas for a new library.

"The Historical Society had long wanted a place to display all their historical artifacts but did not have the ability to raise funds to build and maintain a home of their own," says Grodin. "By joining forces the two groups were the foundation of the movement to get a new library in Lafayette."

Grodin says he was always helping others and had the vision to see what was needed in his hometown. "More importantly he had the ability to make things happen - always with hard work and humor," says Grodin, noting that his years of service to so many different organizations are hard to fathom.

He was passionate about helping seniors age in place and, as a member of the Lafayette Community

Foundation's Liaison Committee for Seniors, he played a large part in establishing the annual Senior Symposium - a resource fair for seniors - co-chairing the first event over 12 years ago.

Lamorinda Village Board Member Don Jenkins, who also devotes his time to helping seniors age in place says that Duncan was his role model. "The way that he cared for his wife was an inspiration to all of us as we try to care for one another as we age in our wonderful community," says Jenkins.

Jenkins recalls first meeting Duncan in 1999 during the creation of the Lafayette Community Foundation, serving with him on the board of directors. He says that in the monthly board meetings, as they all worked to get the Lafayette Library created, built and funded, "Marechal was usually the last to speak on an issue if he chose to speak. When he did speak he used humor, wisdom and conciseness to make his point."

For over 10 years until recently Duncan never missed a Community Liaison Meeting. Judy Carney, the meeting organizer, remembers how he loved hearing about everything going on around the city.

Carney remembers that Duncan never missed a Pearl Harbor Commemoration Day. "He always reminded us about it. And every year he would tell us, and the very thought brought tears to his eyes," says Carney. "Everyone who came in contact with Marechal knew that he cared about doing the right thing for all Americans. He knew he fought for a reason. He was a very proud Vet. To me he was the essence of the Greatest Generation."

Like Jenkins, Carney recalls that Duncan always liked to speak last at meetings and that he would close each meeting by reminding those in attendance, "What you do today will be history tomorrow."

It is clear that Duncan will always be at the heart of Lafayette history.

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