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Orinda Historical Society bounces back

By Sora O'Doherty



Orinda Mayor Inga Miller presents proclamation to Orinda Historical Society president Alison Burns. Photo Sora O'Doherty

While the COVID-19 pandemic dampened many businesses and organizations, the new president of the Orinda Historical Society (OHS) Alison Burns took advantage of the enforced closure by bringing on new board members and volunteers who worked hard to completely turn around the organization, sorting through decades of documents and artifacts, re-arranging the Museum's layout, and, according to the annual report Burns presented to the Orinda City Council on June 6, "presenting ourselves as the kind of historical museum that Orinda could be proud of."

In recognition of the many accomplishments of the OHS, the city council presented Burns with a Proclamation.

The refurbished museum is now officially open every Thursday afternoon from 3 to 5 p.m. and the last Saturday of the month from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Burns is seeking to take advantage of the maximum foot traffic, capitalizing on the Thursday food truck event and the Saturday farmers' market, in addition to opening whenever other events take place in and around the library, such as the Orinda Garden Club's plant sale and the Friends of the Library book sales.

New board members include Vivian Ricci, recording secretary, who recently retired from a career at the Federal Reserve Bank, and Cheryl Cechvala, a product manager for an online educational publisher who has recently agreed to serve as vice president.

Last August saw the publication of Burns' book, "Images of America: Orinda." The book has proved to be an excellent tool for promoting the Historical Society, Burns told the council. She has made a number of presentations that have helped raise awareness of the OHS. This appears to be much needed, as Burns found out that the OHS was listed by the Contra Costa Historical Society as a "dead/dying" organization. A dismayed Burns told them to "watch this space," as she goes about revitalizing the OHS. For example, last November OHS joined with the Lafayette Historical Society and the Moraga Historical Society for a presentation in the Orinda Library Garden Room to an overflow crowd of over 90 participants.

The OHS is taking maximum advantage of its display windows that many pedestrians view when walking between the Library garage and Cafe Teatro, the Library or the Community Center/Park. Burns has received favorable public feedback. In May, for example, the windows focused on Memorial Day and Orinda veterans. Burns and the OHS welcome the submission of photos from Orinda residents, but only those that relate to the city.

OHS has also been successful in obtaining a number of grants. OHS received a \$1,000 grant from the Orinda Community Fund to be used for a plaque for Orinda Motors. Orinda Women's Club granted OHS \$1,500 which is intended for desperately needed new software and other computer updates, Burns says. Another grant, applied for by OHS Archivist Teresa Long, is being used to digitize the Society's collection of Orinda Sun newspapers. Long and Burns delivered half the collection, covering 1948 to 1959, last May and will deliver the rest of the collection this year. The old newspapers were donated to the OHS when the Orinda Sun went out of business.

In addition to being open to the public, the OHS has resumed its Schools Program, kicking off with a kindergarten class from Sleepy Hollow. The presentation was at the OHS and ventured as far as the mural in the Community Park, but OHS hopes that in the next school year they will be able to recommence taking third grade students on a historical walk of downtown Orinda. Board member Laurie Smith, teacher at St. Stephens and the OHS schools specialist, is in charge of the schools program.

Burns also reported that in February of this year the OHS was approached by the Orindawoods committee to help with their 50th Anniversary Celebration in May. Archivist Long scanned many documents for them to display at the event as well as over 100 slides provided by Orindawoods.

Monthly OHS board meetings take place on the third Wednesday of the month from 2 to 5 p.m. in the May Room. The society is seeking new members. Council Member Janet Riley is the Council liaison to the society.

Burns gratefully acknowledged the assistance provided to the society by the city, including Public Works and Parks and Recreation.

More information about the society can be found on their website, <https://orindahistory.org>

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