los altos history museum

UNDER THE OAKS

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Institutional History

As the History Museum's public spokesperson and executive director (ED) from March 2017 to April 2024, I had the privilege of instituting programs and initiatives that changed the Museum's character and the public's perception of it. I am grateful for the opportunity and trust the Board and membership put in me. Looking back over my tenure, I hope what shines through is my conviction that the Museum has an important role to play in reflecting and shaping the identity of the Los Altos area.

2017 was the Museum's 40th anniversary and an auspicious year to begin my work. It was a time of transition, with the departure of Laura Bajuk, the Museum's previous ED, and the unveiling just before I arrived of a new website and a new logo. I interpreted the multicolored logo as the Museum wanting to engage on many levels with the public and to welcome people of many ages, backgrounds, and perspectives.

But the question in my mind was, *What public good are we offering the Museum's visitors?* In my experience, a museum's two main roles are research (people gain new information) and identity (people leave with a better understanding of the world around them and their part in it). I wanted to ensure people who came to the Museum recognized that it was a public institution operating on public land for the public good.

During my time as ED, we increased the Museum's capacity to generate, consolidate, and propagate information. We expanded the oral history program and put the histories online, hosted more student interns from Foothill and DeAnza Colleges and San Jose State University, and created exhibits that leveraged artifacts from our collection. Our crowning achievement in that regard was the 2023 opening of the new Permanent Exhibition that displays the Museum's deep information about our local area and invites visitors to explore that rich history.

Dr. Ward, the elegant public face of the Museum, here in 2019 with Lori Tuttle, Supervisor Joe Simitian and past Board President Jane Reed.

Dr. Ward at her farewell event. "It's never easy saying goodbye."

While research is important, the public must feel welcomed and encouraged to come to the Museum or our ability to contribute to the community's identity and understanding is limited. So, I spent much of my time creating systems and structures to make the Museum as welcoming as possible. One specific challenge was our robust wedding rentals program that now is integrated into a fundraising staff position to help the program stay productive and complementary without disrupting visitors' enjoyment of the Museum.

Another challenge was that we had programs to attract young children and retired adults but little to offer people of other ages. As a mother of a teenager, I was aware that teens in particular are seeking values they can emulate. The Permanent Exhibition was crafted to attract teenagers and young adults by leveraging technology and emphasizing inspiring stories of people who have invested deeply in their local community. The place-based organizational structure resonates with teens as they think of themselves as part of the environment. Our engagement with teens began with the *Inspired by Juana* exhibit that opened in 2018 and where we compensated for the lack of artifacts from Juana Briones by having teens create artwork inspired by her complex and fascinating life. Our engagement continued with a teen docent program, inviting teens to volunteer throughout the year. Such opportunities help teens develop a sense of identity, purpose, and pride.

To keep residents engaged with the Museum, I developed touch points: The Apricot STEM Fair with science-based activities, unveiled in 2018, built on the tremendous success of Train Days but with a slightly older target audience of 7 to 12 years. Dancing through the Decades, the Museum's

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Institutional History

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annual fundraising auction that replaced the Crab Feed, gave working parents an opportunity to dress up and come to the Museum on a Saturday night. It premiered in 2022, and almost everyone showed up in 1920s-inspired outfits! The Museum's Third Thursday programs, started in May 2023, are scheduled so working adults can come to the Museum for content tailored to "empty nesters" and other thoughtful adults.

Being welcoming and providing a forum for exploring what it means to be a Los Altan also means developing programs of interest to people of diverse backgrounds. Routinely scheduling exhibitions that help develop empathy and understanding among people from other countries and cultures is a way we have done this, such as the *Wide American Earth* exhibit that featured the Asian agricultural immigrant experience. But we have also delved into topics that cut across different cultures to show ways we are interconnected, like *Silicon Valley Eats: A Taste for Innovation* and *El Camino Real: Changing California* exhibitions.

Ironically, my seven years at the Museum were marked by three very significant periods of public closure: the Los Altos Community Center construction and subsequent blocking of our parking lot; the COVID-19 public health order to stay home and limit contact; and our own partial closure during the revamping of the Permanent Exhibition. The COVID-19 shutdowns derailed efforts to expand the Museum's open hours, which have remained at 16 hours a week since 2001. As an ED committed to being open and welcoming to the public, this was disappointing but beyond our control.

An organization's internal culture also affects how it operates externally. For the Museum to be a welcoming institution, I focused on creating trustworthy, transparent, and fair internal practices to give everyone a chance to be heard, such as the Weathervane Society, the Committee Chairs quarterly meetings, the Diversity Advisory Group, and the Orchard Commons Committee. With these and other changes, my goal was to breed mutual respect, understanding, and patience while balancing all the activity that hums around the Museum.

Throughout my time at the Museum, I hope I have instituted programs and structures that will positively impact the institution into the future. It has been a huge privilege to work with such intelligent, entrepreneurial, and hardworking people. Together, these efforts have brought the Museum closer to our vision of being the premier center for local intercultural and intergenerational connections. Our mission remains focused on producing educational content through the creative energy of staff and volunteers willing to challenge established narratives.

~ Dr. Elisabeth Ward

President's Pen

June is always a time of transition at the Museum. After six years of service including two as President, I will leave the Board, as will my colleagues Gerri Acers, Kelly Davis, Janet Klinke, and Alex Wang. I'm grateful for the diligence and wisdom they brought to guiding the Museum. Meanwhile, the Nominating Committee is preparing an excellent slate of new Board members to start their three-year terms at the end of the month. A new youth representative will succeed Audrey Hollenbeck, who set a high standard for this newly established position. I'm particularly excited to hand the President's Pen to Vicki Holman, whose deep experience and commitment will serve as a strong foundation for her leadership.

What a privilege it's been to serve the Museum during these years. Navigating the pandemic, inaugurating an awesome new Permanent Exhibition, establishing the Third Thursday program of notable speakers and community conversation, planting almost three hundred new apricot trees as stewards of the Heritage Orchard, and so much more. Through all these efforts, I'm consistently impressed by the real leadership that arises spontaneously from our volunteers, supporters, and staff. A positive can-do attitude is the hallmark of the Museum community.

This year marks even more transition than usual, as we bid farewell to Dr. Elisabeth Ward. Her seven years were a time of remarkable progress for the Museum. The gathering in April celebrating Elisabeth's time with us was a wonderful reminder of a deep connection with the Los Altos community. We shall miss her.

Fortunately, an excellent Interim Executive Director has stepped up to guide the Museum. Julie Bly DeVere is new to this role, but deeply familiar with our community and with museum direction. When you read her introduction in this newsletter, I'm sure you'll share my gratitude for our good fortune and welcome her warmly.

As the story of Los Altos unfolds, one chapter closes, and then the page turns to open the next. Our Museum's story is far from over—it continues onward with each passing day, fueled by the passion and dedication of those who cherish our shared history. We look forward to writing our next chapter.

~ Larry Lang

LOS ALTOS HISTORY MUSEUM
"UNDER THE OAKS"

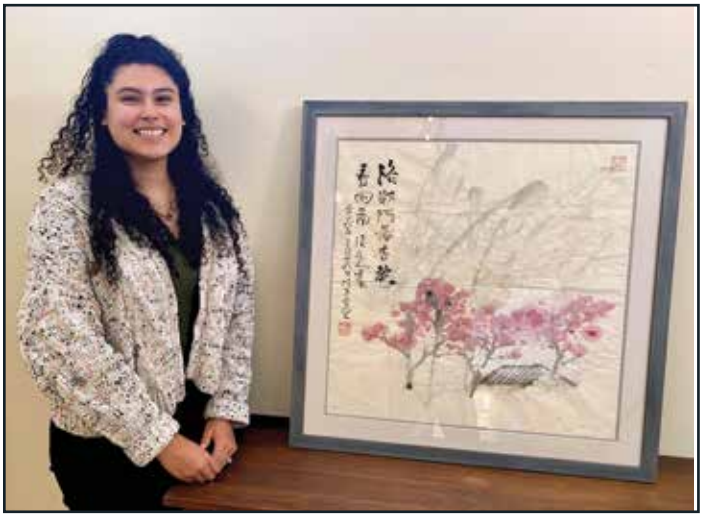
Gary Hedden, *Editor* Judi Eichler, *Graphic Design*
Gloria Geller, *Copy Editor*

A publication of interest to citizens of Los Altos, Los Altos Hills, and neighboring communities, produced by the Association of the Los Altos Historical Museum.

Our Hidden Gems

Hau Beiren was born in the Liaoning Province in China in 1917 and built his home in Los Altos in 1971. Beiren was the first person in his family to pick up a paintbrush and started painting at a young age. He wanted to be a sociology teacher, but when he finished college in 1943, World War II had begun, and he started working for the Chinese Foreign Affairs Department. After the war was over, Beiren became an editor of a magazine and also helped Taiwan write their new constitution. His signature is on it!

In the mid-1950s after Picasso (yes, Pablo Picasso) told China's most famous painter at the time, Zhang Daqian, that Chinese art was being lost at art shows due to its lack of color, Daqian told Beiren and a group of expatriate artists what Picasso said. Beiren and the group took it upon themselves to begin creating colorful Chinese art while still employing traditional techniques.



Sophia Abarca with Hau Beiren's painting.

Hau Beiren's painting, "Apricot Spring Blossoms in Los Altos Springtime," was inspired by where he lived. Painted on rice paper with watercolors, the painting shows pink apricot blossoms with Los Altos City Hall. The characters on the left translate to "2016 March 19 Paint at Old Apricot Villa." The characters on the right translate to "Los Altos Apricot blossoms in the spring rain." The red chop (seal) is Hau Beiren's signature. Beiren painted this art piece in his "Old Apricot Villa" home in Los Altos specifically for the History Museum.

The painting is currently in our Main Gallery during the *Expressions: Multicultural Artists Showcase* exhibition that runs until September 15. Be sure to stop by and view it!

~ Sophia Abarca

Volunteer Highlights

Become a part of history: Explore! Learn! Connect! At Los Altos History Museum, you explore the past and present of Los Altos, you learn about the greater Silicon Valley, and you connect with new friends and visitors from all over the world. This is what it means to be a volunteer at the History Museum.

We, Brigitte Ahlfeldt and Peggy Davis, are the co-chairs of the Volunteer Development Committee, and Allison Aldrich is the Board liaison. The committee's primary responsibilities are to recruit volunteers for the Museum's many committees and to recognize volunteer achievements. Together with Lillie Moore, the education and volunteer coordinator, we interview each volunteer to see which committee best fits their interests and abilities. We have met so many amazing people!

This committee staffs an information and sign-up table at every Museum event and at many City events, such as the Los Altos farmers' market, the Community Center Open House, and the Community Volunteer Fair. In August, the committee honors distinguished volunteers of the year, and in December, you will see a Christmas tree in downtown Los Altos that has been decorated with the names of Museum volunteers.

Our volunteers are very dedicated and enthusiastic individuals, and we are thankful for their commitment to the Museum. If you are interested in becoming a part of this vibrant group of volunteers, please contact the Museum at *www.losaltoshistory.org/support/volunteer*.

~ Brigitte Ahlfeldt and Peggy Davis

Brigitte and Peggy.

Spotlight on the Oral History Project

We are fortunate that Judy William conducted an Oral History Project interview with Richard "Dick" Henning in 2018. Dick is well known as the founder of the Celebrity Forum. He has also contributed to our community through his work as an educator and Los Altos Rotarian.

Dick was raised in the small town of Taft, California, where he encountered a progressive local Rotary chapter. When he was a teacher at Sunnyvale High School, Henry Gunn invited him to participate in the Rotary International program. Dick recalls that he wasn't sure what Rotary was, but he did remember that he had heard Rotary took down a racist sign at Taft's town border and put up a welcoming sign. He joined a Rotary International trip to Japan as an ambassador of friendship. Dick says, "Rotary and that trip to Japan changed my life."

In his interview, Dick discusses the Rotary projects he worked on and recalls how he "co-founded Camp RYLA, which is an acronym of Rotary Youth Leadership Awards… It was a leadership camp for juniors in high school … where they stay for the whole week, and at the end of that, they are so high. It's just amazing." He was also involved in multiple international projects, like raising money for wheelchairs that were delivered to four countries and helping implement clean water systems for villages in India. Dick served alongside Walter Singer and Dude Angus on the committee that produced the HIV / AIDS awareness film, *The Los Altos Story*.

Dick Henning, 2016 photo, courtesy Dick Henning.

Dick's participation in these projects earned him the Service Above Self Award, the highest Rotary award given to a Rotarian, which surprised him. However, when asked what he is most proud of doing, Dick said that while a couple things came to mind, he was most proud of the students he had taught.

~ Kristin Morris, chair, Oral History Committee, and Abigail Haydis, intern, San Jose State University.

History in the News

Inspired by the exhibition *El Camino Real: Changing California*, the prompt for the Margaret Thompson Essay Contest—How and why did your family come to California?—asked students to tell their stories. The response was fascinating, as their stories document the hardworking people who come to our city from all over.

Vivia, a third grader at Gardner Bullis wrote: "A little girl lived in Vietnam. At the end of the Vietnam War, her family was forced to leave their country. The little girl's family traveled by an aircraft carrier called the USS Midway from Vietnam to the Philippines, by airplane to Guam, and then to Ottawa, Canada. That once little girl found a job in Vancouver and moved there. A little boy lived in India in a small apartment with his parents, grandparents, and brother. He moved to Virginia for college for a better future. It was too expensive to stay in Virginia, so he moved to a different school in Ottawa, Canada. After graduating, he moved to Vancouver. The little girl is my mom and the little boy is my dad. My parents met in Vancouver and moved to California because of the amazing technological innovations here."

Vivia, Sophia and Finley at the ice cream social May 14.

Sophia, in fifth grade at St. Nicholas wrote: "My journey to California started back in 1951 before I was born when my great grandparents moved to Los Angeles, California, from Nayarit, Mexico, to work in agriculture. My grandparents moved back to Mexico, then my grandmother came to Arizona, then back to Mexico, then to Texas. My mom grew up in El Paso. And at the age of four, my story came full circle when my family and I moved to California for my dad's job at Google. We have now been in California for eight years, and we believe that this has been the best decision. We have a great life, great jobs, lots of sunshine, and tons of great friends."

Finley, a sixth grader at Almond wrote: "My dad's family has been in California for many generations. My grandparents lived in Los Angeles back when it was still mostly farmland. My mom's ancestors originally immigrated from Italy and Yugoslavia. They then settled on California's coast due to the fisherman jobs that they were working. My parents met in their first year at Santa Clara University and later were married at Mission Santa Clara. My parents' routes to California were very different, but in the end, they forged a life together at Mission Santa Clara. The original bells which lined the streets of the historic El Camino Real came from the missions. I was fascinated to learn that my parents were married in such a symbolic establishment in California history."

These are just three of the many wonderful stories, lightly edited, written by our young students that describe the diverse and talented families shaping today's history.

~ Gary Hedden

Historic Preservation Award

Liz Nyberg at the Museum.

The 2024 Los Altos Historic Preservation Award given by the Los Altos Historical Commission goes to Liz Nyberg, and we could not be happier!

Liz has long been active at the History Museum, quietly busy and keeping a low profile. A docent since 1991, she has taught new docents about the history of the J. Gilbert Smith House; helped with the Museum's annual Crab Feed fundraiser for over 20 years; was president of the Museum Board for four years (1996–2000); helped with Dancing through the Decades; and recently stepped up to head the Docent Committee, managing docent scheduling.

But there's more. She and the late Paul Nyberg purchased the *Los Altos Town Crier* in 1993, and credit goes to them for the weekly record of events that are preserved in the newspaper and become our history. For all of that and more, the Nybergs were named 2017 Los Altans of the Year.

Dr. Elisabeth Ward wrote in support of her nomination, Liz Nyberg "has inspired generations of Los Altans to care about local history in ways big and small." Julie Rose wrote, Liz "is an effective leader, motivator, and role model, and she has a unique ability to encourage the active participation of others." That is from just two of many letters of support. Thank you, Liz, and keep up the great work!

~ Gary Hedden

Welcome to our new members:

Alex Apffel
Bonnie and John Burdett-Walker
China Campbell
Claudia Cilker
Vivien D'Andrea
Tamara Fagin
Michael Fair
Stu and Jeanne Farwell
Barbara Groff
Leslie Higashiuchi
Jill and Brian Kasser
Diane and Matthew Levine
S.M.Lieu
Ricena Ljubojevic
Lenore and Paul Lovoi
William Moerner
Rod Morimoto
Jayne and Jeff Nilles
Roger Quinlan
Alison and Rich Rao
Misha and Achal Sharma
John and Moonyoung Suk
Cynthia Wemyss
Nancy and Bart Westcott
Lou Wolner

Business Members

BK Collections
DJM Inspections
Christopher Fling, Realtor
Furuichi Design
Los Altos Town Crier
The Garden Club of Los Altos

Partner Member
Kohler Legacy Law Group, PC

Corporate Member
Kiwanis Club of Los Altos

Interim Director's Corner

Having spent a large part of my career helping preserve and document the history of the Peninsula and South Bay, you can imagine that I am delighted to finally be working in my own hometown. I grew up in South Los Altos during a time when kids still played outside until the streetlights came on.

I have always had a love of history and been curious about what came before us and pondered what will remain to be found by future generations. The history programs and field trips that I was lucky enough to attend helped me learn the history of this place we all call home.

Historic houses and sites have often been the focus in my museum career, whether it was Campbell's 1925 Ainsley House, Filoli's 1917 Georgian mansion, or Egyptian Pharaoh Khasekhemwy's ancient funerary site in Abydos, Egypt. Now I look forward to learning more about the J. Gilbert Smith House. I know the impact these places can make on our communities.

I'm delighted to join the team of staff and volunteers at Los Altos History Museum. I truly believe that museums and collections have the capacity to serve as tangible points of connection between the past and the present, especially when combined with interpretation, exhibitions, community building, and research. This is at the heart of our mission to bridge the past and the present.

Thank you for the warm welcome, and I hope to see you soon.

~ Julie Bly DeVere

Staff

Julie Bly DeVere, *Interim Executive Director*
Sophia Abarca, *Curator of Collections*
Diane Holcomb, *Director of Communications*
Jordan Grealish, *Exhibits Specialist*
Lillie Moore, *Education and Volunteer Coordinator*
Lisa Porter, *Rental Events Marketing Manager*
Ken Buscho, *Operations Manager*
Barbara Klein, *Bookkeeper*
Faustino Carrillo, *Gardener*

Photo Gallery

Volunteer Steve Annen and Board President Larry Lang pouring cocktails for Dancing through the Decades in March.

Local young entrepreneurs Naiel and Punhal Chaudry serving their delicious desserts.

Board members Kuljeet Kalkat, Margo Horn and Jay Thomas with Elvis in the background.

Jan Meyer and Sally Coffin - it wouldn't be the nifty 50s without poodle skirts!

Board Vice President Vicki Holman and volunteer Mary Kuperman enjoying the party.

Elisabeth Ward posing with a beautiful vintage '57 Chevy. Vroom, vroom. Photo credit Diane Holcomb.

Photo Gallery

Singer Margo Cilker, right, performing at the Valley of Heart's Delight Concert in April.

Kaye Loughmiller describing "Cal Aggies" to some very engaged 4th grade students in May.

Jordan Grealish, Jeanine Valadez and Julie Rose, the talented curators behind From Earthquakes to Epidemics.

Third Thursday panelists Rich Casey, Wyatt Allen, Dick Henning and Mary Prochnow giving us fascinating insights into the Rotary AIDs project.

Larry Lang and Interim Director Julie Bly DeVere at Elisabeth Ward's farewell gathering, April 30. Photo Credit Julie Rose.

Jacques Fossourier presenting Elisabeth Ward with flowers and a big thank you.

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www.losaltoshistory.org

Museum and Store Hours

Thursday to Sunday, Noon-4pm

We are closed New Year's Day, Easter, Fourth of July, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Eve, and Christmas Day.

General Inquiries

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(650) 948-9427 x11
research@losaltoshistory.org

Event Rentals

(650) 948-9427 x12
weddings@losaltoshistory.org

Mission Statement *The Los Altos History Museum gathers and presents compelling stories and artifacts that bridge the past and the present by fostering the creative energy of staff and volunteers to challenge established narratives and produce engaging educational programs and exhibits for the community.*

On The Calendar

Rotary Club of Los Altos: 75 Years of Service Above Self, open through Aug. 4, in the J. Gilbert Smith House.

Expressions: Multicultural Artists Showcase, open through Sept. 15, Main Gallery.

***Neighborhood Block Party: Downtown Triangle**, Third Thursday, June 20, 5:30-7pm, at the Museum.

Annual Meeting of Members, Tuesday, June 25, 4-6pm, at the Museum.

Apricot STEM Fair, Sat., June 29, 10am-3pm, at the Museum.

***Harmony in Motion: The Vishwa Shanthi Dance Experience**, Third Thursday, July 18, 5:30-7pm, at the Museum.

Sarah Winchester, opens August 8, in the J. Gilbert Smith House.

***Arts Los Altos: Connecting Community with Public Art**, Third Thursday, August 15, 5:30-7pm, at the Museum.

Member's BBQ and Volunteer Appreciation, Sun., August 25, 5-8pm, at the Museum.

Train Days, Sept. 21-22, 10am-3pm, at the Museum.

History of Hidden Villa, opens Thurs., Oct. 3, Main Gallery.

*Registration required.

Elisabeth Ward wearing a Crab Feed hat in 2019. "Goodbye and thanks for the memories."

Board Meetings, Fourth Tuesday each month, 4 pm, in person and online
Third Thursdays. Join us for stimulating conversations, 5:30-7pm. Free for Museum members.