



Generosity – A Special Section to The Ark

June 18, 2014

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Tiburon residents take the lead in Redwoods renovation

A \$32.8-million-dollar renovation project is now underway at The Redwoods, a nonprofit residential community for seniors in Mill Valley, and two Tiburon residents, Sudha Pennathur and Allan Bortel, have been deeply involved in supporting the project since its inception.

For Pennathur, the president of The Redwoods' board of directors, it's personal.

"My mother-in-law, who was like a mother to me, came at 82 to live at The Redwoods, not to die there," Pennathur says.

She visited every day during the eight years her mother-in-law was at The Redwoods and saw first hand "the uniqueness of the community, the vitality of the people there, the sense of joy.

"And I saw the importance of the diversity that exists among the residents" she says.

A long-time financial supporter of The Redwoods and a major donor to the capital campaign that he helped set up to raise money for the revitalization project, Bortel has also been a volunteer there for 15 years.

"I see The Redwoods as such a valuable institution in Southern Marin," Bortel says, "and I never hear any criticism."

The 42-year-old community, whose philosophy is "nurturing a culture of possibility and wellness," is housed in 15 buildings on 10 acres at the corner of Miller Avenue and Camino Alto, and provides affordable, multi-level rental housing, care and services to about 340 residents. Four levels of care are offered: independent living, residential living, personal care and skilled nursing. Entry at any level of care is age 62, and the current age range is 72-104. The current wait list for independent living is 700 names long. Sixty percent of residents are from Marin, with 9 percent from Belvedere and Tiburon.

Began in December 2013, the revitalization project, which was six years in planning and will be completed in two phases, will modernize existing living units, construct several new public spaces and provide additional housing for Marin's growing elderly population with modest incomes. The renovation phase is expected to be finished in 2016; the construction of new living units is scheduled to begin after the renovation is completed.

Construction costs are being covered by a \$28.2 million bond, \$2 million in community reserves and a \$2.6 million capital campaign which is still underway, with \$800,000 left to raise.

Kathie Graham, The Redwoods' communications consultant, says that according to the nonprofit's bond financing document, the population group of ages 65 and older has increased in Marin from 12.5 percent in 2000 to 17.1 percent in 2013.

"This age group is expected to approach 20 percent of the total Marin population by 2018, and the key group for The Redwoods, ages 75-84, is expected to increase at a rate of four times above the primary market area average age over the next five years," Graham says.

"The revitalization at The Redwoods is linked to this demographic trend," says Chief Executive Officer Barbara Solomon.

"With the increase in older adults and the limited affordable senior housing that is available — we have 60 (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development) units now and in several years we'll have 40 units of affordable housing — communities like ours are more important than ever to seniors, their families and to the broader community.

"Of the baby boomers starting to come — we already have three Vietnam vets — we have to be modern enough for them and still maintain the culture of The Redwoods, which is not only a treasure for the community, but for the whole county," Solomon says.

During an extensive tour of the campus, Solomon pointed out the three huge trailers housing the temporary kitchen that puts out 600 meals a day, the new Wellness/Fitness Center and cafe, green campus grounds, art studio, and the consignment and beauty shops, both of which are open to the public. The background construction noise has been solved, Solomon says. "Anyone who wants one can have a noise-canceling headphone."

In her home in Tiburon, Sudha Pennathur arranges jewelry she designed for her company, Designs by Sudha. Pennathur donates the revenue from her annual holiday sale to various nonprofits, including The Redwoods.

In her capacity as board president, Pennathur says she now spends a lot of her time focused on The Redwoods' ongoing capital campaign for the revitalization project. She also supports the project via her business, Designs by Sudha — high-end gifts, jewelry, scarves, and home textiles crafted in India and around the world and sold in specialty department stores, boutiques, catalogs and museum shops. Pennathur holds annual holiday sales and the profits from the two weekends are donated to local nonprofits. Last year's events were held in donated space at the Strawberry Village shopping center and 100 percent of proceeds were donated to Bread & Roses, the Angel Island Conservancy, Gateway Public Schools, The Friendship Club and The Redwoods.

Pennathur, who has also chaired the board of Bread and Roses and was on the board of the Angel Island Conservancy, says, "I have always been passionate about giving back to my community."

Bortel, a retired securities analyst, has extended his commitment to elderly citizens at the local and state level as the co-chair of Tiburon Peninsula Village, a nonprofit that helps seniors age in place; as Tiburon's representative on the Marin County Commission on Aging, and as the chairman of the



Citizens' Oversight Commission on Transportation. Bortel is also one of 40 Senior Senators of the California Senior Legislature, a "shadow" legislature that proposes new state laws benefiting seniors.

In addition to financial support, Bortel has also brought his technical expertise to The Redwoods' residents. "Now everyone there has free Wi-Fi," Bortel says. "I've taught dozens and dozens of them to use computers, in their apartments and in the computer lab I set up."

His work with The Redwoods is obviously close to his heart, and the feeling is mutual. In 2006 he was named The Redwoods' Volunteer of the Year and in 2011 he received the same honor from Leading Age California, an advocacy nonprofit for senior living, formerly known as the California Association of Homes and Services for the Aging.

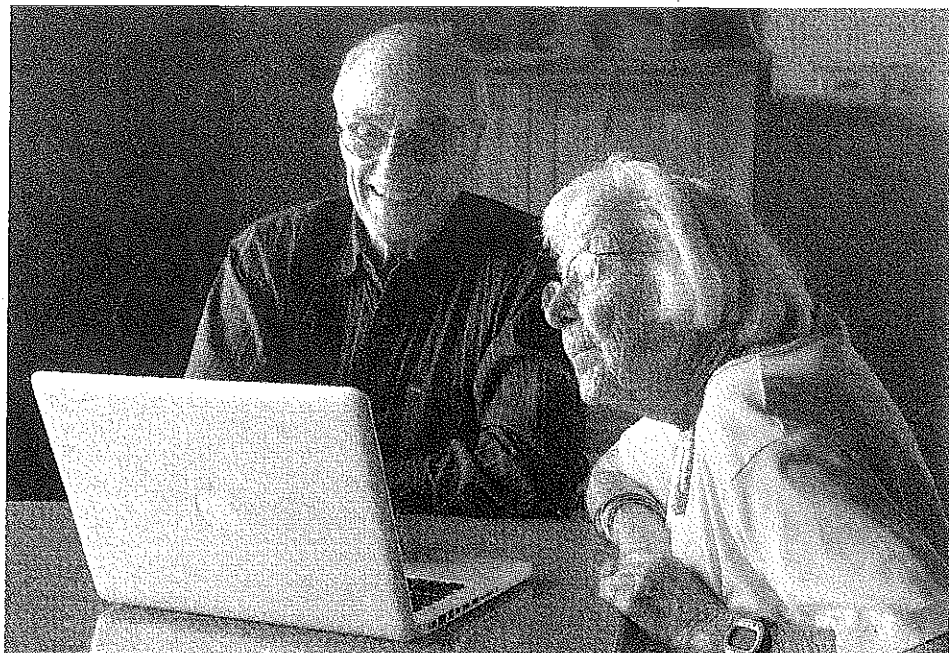
The Redwoods has roots deep in the wider community of Marin, from which it draws many resources, including 700 outside volunteers and 200 resident volunteers who support various programs.

"The Redwoods is different, because it was born out of community," Solomon says. "While it was founded by the Community Church of Mill Valley, it is nondenominational and does not have an institutional feeling."

Claire Russell, a resident of Tiburon for 40 years who moved to the community seven years ago, says she's happy living at The Redwoods.

"I was alone and lonesome in my house, and the house and garden were just more than I wanted to keep up," Russell says. "I didn't find it hard to adjust to my new one-bedroom Redwoods apartment. The first night there I felt like I was in a little cozy cocoon."

Before moving to The Redwoods, Russell, who is a master gardener, volunteered in their garden, where she continues to work today. "I love the garden," Russell says. "It's wonderful for people who have had their own gardens; the two levels of raised beds even give access to people in wheelchairs."



JOCELYN KNIGHT PHOTOS/ FOR THE ARK

Tiburon resident Allan Bortel with Claire Russell, a resident of The Redwoods, in the computer lab Bortel established at the senior community in Mill Valley.

The architect's rendering of the Center for Dynamic Aging, a new wellness and fitness facility, scheduled to be completed by June 2016.

BAR ARCHITECTS /
PROVIDED BY THE REDWOODS



Russell says she also enjoys the unique programs offered at The Redwoods — especially the line-dancing and exercise programs. Other activities include Rock the Ages and The Redwoods Drummers musical groups, reading groups, Seniors for Peace, Circles of Connection support groups, and stimulating discussions on issues such as global warming, all of which go on with the construction around them.

"The revitalization project is being made as easy as possible for us," Russell says, "and no one has to move out of the community during construction. We have a meeting once a week with a problem-solver on-hand, so residents can ask questions."

Learn more

For more information about The Redwoods nonprofit elder community and the current revitalization campaign, visit theredwoods.org.

Contributing writer Ann Mizel is a longtime Strawberry resident and has been with The Ark since 1987.