

Celebrating community

Meet the winners of Menlo Park's 2018 Golden Acorn Awards



Magali Gauthier/The Almanac

Menlowe Ballet's Executive Director Lisa Shively, Artistic Director Michael Lowe and Associate Artistic Director Sarah Jean-Measor, above, were recognized for "business excellence" at Menlo Park's 2018 Golden Acorn Awards. **On the cover** clockwise, from top left: Peninsula Volunteers' Meals on Wheels volunteer Michelle Bui scoops mashed potatoes to be delivered to homebound seniors and disabled adults. Menlo Park City Attorney Bill McClure works in his office. Menlowe Ballet staff, listed above, chat at the Menlo Park Academy of Dance. All Students Matter volunteer Christina Lee reads with Jaazanaih at Belle Haven Elementary School. Photos by Magali Gauthier. All Students Matter photo by Irene Searles.



Photo by Irene Searles.

All Students Matter volunteer Keri Tully reads with Guillermo in a first-grade classroom at Belle Haven Elementary school.

By Kate Bradshaw
Almanac Staff Writer

I believe our democracy is at stake if we do not re-establish a sense of community," said Rich Gordon, former state assemblyman and county supervisor, and resident of unincorporated Menlo Park, speaking before a large crowd at a Sept. 20 ceremony held to recognize community contributors in Menlo Park.

Gordon's keynote remarks encouraged community members to place dialogue over debate, to prize quality of time spent with people rather than quantity (perhaps through less tech-mediated communication), to embrace civic engagement and to engage in active service toward others in the community — all stepping stones, he said, to developing shared values that foster altruism and deter greed. Recalling a more idyllic America of yesteryear, he remarked: "If the barn burned down, you didn't call FEMA. Your neighbors raised the barn."

The 2018 winners of the Golden Acorn Awards, a recognition program sponsored by the Menlo Park Chamber of Commerce, are organizations and people who exemplify such community-mindedness, he said.

There were four winners this year: in the category of business excellence, Menlowe Ballet; in community service, All Students Matter; in professional excellence, Menlo Park City Attorney Bill McClure; and in the "unsung hero" category, Peninsula Volunteers Inc.'s Meals on Wheels program.

Menlo Park's 42nd Golden Acorn Awards ceremony was held at the new Hotel Nia in eastern Menlo Park, where trays of elegant appetizers and wine in abundance were distributed among elegant people. There was valet-only parking and live music.

Facebook gave each of the nonprofit award recipients \$5,000.

According to Fran Dehn, Chamber of Commerce president and CEO, the winners were chosen from a "not insignificant" number of applications received from the public before Aug. 10. A nomination committee from the Chamber

of Commerce chose winners based on their contributions to the community.

Menlowe Ballet

Menlowe Ballet, which launched in 2011, is a dance company started by founding artistic director Michael Lowe and executive director Lisa Shively. Together, they put together two ballet productions a year.

During the holiday season, the company stages its original "It's a Wonderful Nutcracker" — a fusion of Frank Capra's iconic holiday film "It's a Wonderful Life" and the more traditional Nutcracker ballet. In explaining the work, Shively said that she felt the Nutcracker alone emphasizes abundance rather than a more heartwarming seasonal message of the "presence" of loved ones being more important than "presents."

Why they won the "business" excellence award was a bit surprising, Shively said. Perhaps, she added, it's because she operates under the belief that a nonprofit has a strong obligation to put every donated dollar into the production of the shows — it all goes toward the costs of producing the shows and to dancers' salaries.

She told the awards ceremony audience that she's hoping to make the ballet "stop being the best hidden secret in Menlo Park." Later, she said she's hoping to make going to Menlowe Ballet performances as widespread a community activity as attending a Stanford football game. "We're not there yet," she said.

All Students Matter

All Students Matter brings volunteers into Ravenswood City School District classrooms to support teachers and provide in-classroom tutoring. Volunteers — often parents from other school districts already saturated with parent volunteers — are trained to help kids in transitional kindergarten through fifth grade with reading, math and social/emotional troubles.

According to Carolyn Blatman, the organization's executive director, 100 percent of teachers in the program say they feel the volunteers help boost reading levels and kids'

self-esteem. The organization puts about 200 volunteers to work in about 70 classrooms in the district and helps about 2,000 kids, she said.

Jeanette Kennedy, director of strategic planning and marketing, said she's been involved as a volunteer since 2011 and is motivated to create a more equal education for kids in the Ravenswood district.

Lori Brockman, who works as a site director at Willow Oaks Elementary School, where she helps coordinate volunteers, said she didn't realize she had a passion for teaching until she started volunteering. Unlike other classrooms in the more affluent nearby districts, where there is an abundance of parents with time to volunteer in the classroom, Ravenswood district teachers seem to appreciate the volunteers more and the kids like having them there, she said.

Of the kids they work with, many have parents who are working two or three full-time jobs, Blatman said. Some may even work in volunteers' homes by day, or at Facebook by night, she said. As well-off parents with the time to volunteer in nearby schools, she said, they are able to support kids whose parents must be out working to make ends meet.

"We nurture them, believe in them, and root for them," she said.

Bill McClure

Menlo Park's City Attorney Bill McClure has been in his role for about 25 years, which means he's probably attended about a thousand City Council meetings, said Mayor Peter Ohtaki, who introduced the Golden Acorn winners.

McClure said he was surprised to be receiving the award since, as a kid growing up in Menlo Park, he used to pull pranks. He credited former city attorney Jack Jorgenson for hiring him at the law firm, now Jorgenson, Siegel, McClure & Flegel, and for providing guidance in how to deal with the City Council and the public: one needs a sense of humor and a thick skin, he said.

Through his years of mandatory council meetings, he said, there were inevitably some nights when he didn't want to go. So one night, he and his young family started a goofy hand-wave or "boing," as he called it, which developed into a regular tradition that would cheer him up and brace for the marathon meeting ahead.

When asked what some of his proudest accomplishments are as city attorney, he said he's proud of negotiating the

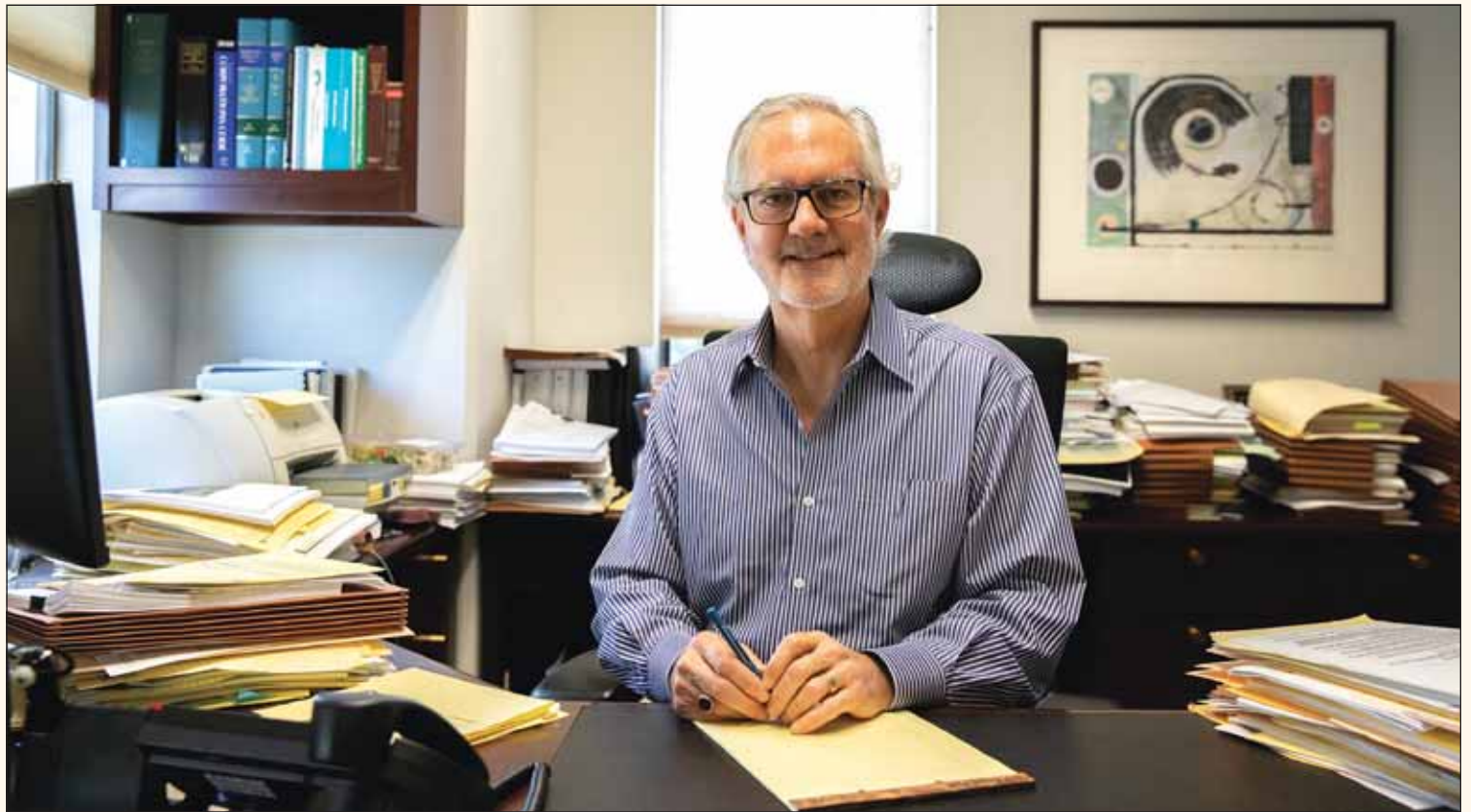


Photo by Magali Gauthier.

Menlo Park City Attorney Bill McClure, a partner at Jorgenson, Siegel, McClure & Flegel, has been city attorney since 1993. A longtime local, he attended Oak Knoll School and Menlo-Atherton High School.

community benefits that have been part of the development agreements on the Menlo Gateway project (which included the hotel where the night's event was held) and Facebook's first campus, working to close the city's landfill and funding its transformation into Bedwell Bayfront Park, and working out an agreement to purchase the Rosener House over time.

Peninsula Volunteers' Meals on Wheels

Peninsula Volunteers' Meals

on Wheels program recruits volunteers to deliver meals to homebound seniors and adults with disabilities throughout San Mateo County. Marilyn Baker-Venturini, Peninsula Volunteers director of nutrition service, said there are about 100 volunteers in the county who help monthly to pack and deliver meals or provide other administrative support for the program.

The organization has provided meals delivered to homes in the county since 1977, serving

more than 100,000 meals a year.

Of the recipients, 54 percent are seniors who live alone, and 20 percent are people who have no sources of food other than what Meals on Wheels delivers.

Greg and Nancy Wilson of Redwood City, who have volunteered for four years, say they've come to know the people on their delivery circuit near downtown Redwood City, and in addition to delivering meals, they like to chat about things like the TV shows they're

watching with the people they visit.

Glenda and Gordon Hughes of Palo Alto have volunteered for about eight years as meal deliverers in Menlo Park and East Palo Alto. Gordon said that delivering meals is an ideal volunteer activity for couples who have extra time and want to spend time together. Glenda said they've come to know the people they deliver to well. And, they added, the recipients really appreciate the meals and the visits. ■



Photo by Magali Gauthier.

Marilyn Baker-Venturini, director of nutrition services for Peninsula Volunteers' Meals on Wheels program, overlooks the meal-packing process on Sept. 20.