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Arts in Mind: Advocating for the arts

By L.A. Winokur
 Mill Valley Herald

Longtime Mill Valley resident Susan Sachs Lipman - Suz, for short - has always loved writing. When she was only 4 or 5 years old, she would steal the cardboard packaging from the shirts her father regularly brought home from the dry cleaner and use it to make her own newspapers. That was over 40 years ago and, not surprisingly, she has been writing ever since.

Parent, tireless community and school volunteer, not to mention Kiddo! Arts Committee and former Kiddo! board member, Suz has just finished up a three-year stint writing the Arts in Mind column. (Not to worry. You can still find her on her blog, suzlipman.com, which she hopes will evolve into a place for creative expression and dialogue.) As she turns over this column to me, I thought it only fitting to start by publicly thanking Suz for a job incredibly well done and by sharing a little about her and her thoughts on the local arts scene.

Suz was born and raised in Santa Monica, in the pre-Proposition 13 world of 1960s and '70s California, where art, music, writing and theater were a staple in the public schools. She fondly recalls that "every kid had a chance to play an instrument," supplied by the school, no less! Suz chose the violin, her brother the trumpet. He went on to become the principal trumpet for the Cleveland Orchestra. It just goes to show, Suz says, that when children are exposed to music and art and the like, you never know where it might lead.

She met the man who would become her husband, Michael Lipman, when the two were working on the UCLA student newspaper. (Michael, an animator by trade, is also the Mill Valley Herald's cartoonist "Lippy." You can check out his work at lippy.com.) The couple moved to Mill Valley 17 years ago, after time spent in New York and Los Angeles. They have lived in Homestead Valley for 13 of those years with their daughter, Anna, now a Mill Valley Middle School eighth-grader. Suz spent eight years on the Homestead Valley Community Association Board, five as its president. (She wrote about the neighborhood's rich arts history in a two-part series for this newspaper.) She also just joined the board of trustees of the Mill Valley Public Library.

Her professional background includes an enviable and eclectic mix of print, broadcast and Internet work, including writing for magazines Harper's Bazaar and Entrepreneur and working on a television show, "Swann's Crossing," which starred a young Sarah Michelle Gellar. More recently, Suz spent five years writing for a syndicated online column, "Bay Area Moms," and another five as a reader for Zoetrope, Francis Ford Coppola's literary magazine. (She also made time to be on the PTA, help in the art room and be a Girl Scout leader.) Suz herself writes short stories and has a novel in the works as well as a nonfiction book honoring the spirit of summer. She's also been instrumental in supporting the Kiddo! student poetry shows, now in their third year.

She and Anna, who's very involved with theater (and has benefited from Kiddo! programs in the schools), also make jam together (they're county fair blue-ribbon winners) and run a homemade soap business - bubbleheadsoap.com - out of their kitchen. All three Lipmans were in a local theater production last year. "It was fun to all be onstage together," she said.

I had the pleasure of talking with Suz recently over coffee, and of continuing our conversation through an e-mail exchange. Here are excerpts.

Mill Valley Herald: You moved here in the early 1990s. How would you characterize the local art scene back then?

Lipman: When I first came to Mill Valley, it was immediately apparent I had arrived somewhere special. People made music in the Depot Plaza and at Sweetwater. There was an annual variety show in which locals performed who were exceedingly talented and funny. I got involved with a group called the Mill Valley Literary Society and saw movies at the library and enjoyed music after the Memorial Day parade and plays at the Marin Theatre Company.

There's always been a lot happening here because people value art of all types, and because the physical beauty tends to attract people who create and appreciate beauty, expression, community and art.

MVH: How has the art scene changed over the years?

SL: Much of that same spirit is here today, even if the venues have changed. Now we have 142 Throckmorton Theatre, with artistic events almost nightly. The city offers multiple opportunities for children to participate in local theater. We have a very active Arts Commission that puts on shows and events, and an incredible depth of programs at the library. Mill Valley, of course, was also known as the home for a lot of musicians, and I'd say that still holds true today.

Three wonderful groups - the Mill Valley Film Festival, the O'Hanlon Center for the Arts and Kiddo! - were already running when I got here, and they just keep getting better. This doesn't happen by accident, but through the work of a lot of people who have passion for the arts and deem it an important part of their inner lives and the life of the community.

MVH: It sounds like community support for the arts remains strong.

SL: I just remembered the Milley Awards! What town has its own art awards? The fact that Mill Valley does speaks volumes about our town.

MVH: What are some of the biggest challenges we face with regard to arts in our community?

SL: I think that funding of the arts, in and out of schools, is going to continue to be a challenge. We've seen or read about communities that closed their libraries and stopped offering music and art in the schools. People here value art and arts education too much to let that happen.

MVH: What else can we do to support the arts, especially during these tough economic times?

SL: You don't have to spend a lot of money to enjoy art. Locally, Mill Valley Philharmonic concerts are free or by donation. Mill Valley and Homestead Valley have free and low-cost outdoor music events. There are low-cost programs at 142 Throckmorton and the Marin Theatre Company. You can enjoy paintings during the First Tuesday Art Walks or the annual Paint-Off in the Plaza. Our library now has museum passes that can be checked out for free museum admission. Readings at the Depot and other bookstores are usually free. Many arts organizations offer free programs for those who are docents or do other volunteering.

Sometimes one effect of an economic downturn is that neighbors come together to make art and enhance community in the process. Art can be uplifting, hopeful, thought-provoking, inspiring, escapist or all of the above.

In tough economic times, people need the arts more than ever.

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