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Lady of The Lark



HELENA DAY BREESE / NEWS-PRESS

In the rustic-industrial interior of The Lark restaurant in the Funk Zone near the train tracks is a 24-seat communal table stacked on vintage radiators. "It's the heart and soul of The Lark," said owner Sherry Villanueva. The popular eatery is named for the sleek overnight Pullman train of the Southern Pacific Railroad that serviced Santa Barbara from 1910 to 1968.

Sherry Villanueva kept vision on track for hip new restaurant whose name was inspired by vintage train

By **MARILYN MCMAHON**
NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

If Sherry Villanueva's father had his wish after she graduated from Salinas High School in 1980, she would have carried on the family tradition and graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point, N.Y., followed by a longtime career in the service.

Instead, she went to UC Berkeley, earned a bachelor's degree in marketing, worked for IBM just at the time desktop computers were being invented, went on to an exciting job in sales and marketing with a radio company called Rabbit Ears Productions that had celebrities like actor Meryl Streep reading classic children's stories like "The Velveteen Rabbit," followed by 10 years doing worldwide trend research for retailers Mervyns, Target and Marshall Field.

Along the way, she married Jim Villanueva, executive director of The Eleos Foundation, and had two daughters, Annie, now 25, and Katy, 22. The Eleos Foundation "strives to improve millions of lives by investing in pioneering business solutions to eradicate extreme poverty," according to its website, www.theeleosfoundation.com.

The family settled in Montecito in 2000 after two years in Buenos Aires. "We sold our home and car in Pacific Palisades to move to Argentina. The Los Angeles area was not a good fit for our family. We wanted to have a family adventure, and we wanted the girls, then 5 and 7, to learn Spanish. We put them in an Argentine school, and they became fluent in six months. It was a really happy time, a great bonding experience," said Ms. Villanueva.

More than 10 years later, Ms. Villanueva "dived head first" into the restaurant business as co-owner with developer Brian Kelly of The Lark, the hugely successful restaurant that opened in August 2013 in the Funk Zone.

"Brian and I were total novices. We held each other's hands and jumped off the cliff together. We took a big risk on each other. I had never done anything like that before. I was a total

rookie, which turned out to be a big gift because when you are brand-new, everyone wants to help. I asked a lot of questions," recalled Ms. Villanueva, 53, while sitting at an outdoor table at the restaurant an hour before it opened for dinner. She spends about 60 hours a week there.

Happy and relaxed, despite the fact she and her husband were leaving the next day for Philadelphia, where Katy was graduating from the University of Pennsylvania, Ms. Villanueva said that she met Mr. Kelly in 2011, not long after her job with Target had ended, and she was looking for something else to do.

"Brian is a very smart creative thinker, and when he invited me to jump in his car and drive to the Funk Zone, where he owned property, I accepted. We walked for three hours. He wanted me as a consultant to help create the property at Anacapa and Yanonali streets," she said.

"Brian pulled me in to the project so I could help him with ideation ... creative ideas, concepts, tenants that create businesses to fill a need in the market while still maintaining the personality, respect for the history and requirements for city zoning of the neighborhood," added Ms. Villanueva.

Gradually, the concept of creating a neighborhood complex developed. "I told Brian he needed to put in a restaurant because the property was on the former site of Castagnola's Fish Market and then the Bay Cafe," said Ms. Villanueva.

That decided, they began looking for just the right person to make the restaurant a reality.

"It was extremely difficult. Finally, Brian said, 'You do it.' Although I had never done anything like this before, the timing was right. It was the same month that Katy, my younger daughter, had left for college. My nest was empty," Ms. Villanueva said.

One of the biggest challenges she faced was choosing a name for an eatery she envisioned as a nostalgic place where people came to have dinner and slow down. With its location near the train tracks, she wanted the name to evoke the nostalgia of train travel. She also

Please see **SHERRY** on **A7**

OUT & ABOUT



Windhager

Windhager joins SB Beautiful board

Dr. Steve Windhager has been elected to the board of directors of Santa Barbara Beautiful. Dr. Windhager is executive director of the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden. He is a member of the Technical Core Committee and past director of the Sustainable Sites Initiative, a joint project of the American Society of Landscape Architects, the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center and the United States Botanic Garden to create sustainable design guidelines and a rating system assessing the sustainability of landscapes, according to a news release. He earned a doctoral degree in environmental science from the University of North Texas.

—Charlotte Boechler

OUR TOWN

'The Purple Cow'

Santa Barbara County and southern San Luis Obispo County communities figure prominently in "The Purple Cow: A Dairy Daughter's Heritage," a compilation of family stories gathered and retold by Laura Lee Tognazzini Dias, a direct descendent of one of the region's earliest dairy pioneers and the daughter of a Guadalupe dairyman. The book's 244 pages tell the story of the local industry's historic course, as well as lighthearted anecdotes related to more than 80 dairies and creameries that were once located in Guadalupe, Lompoc, Los Alamos, Santa Maria, Siquoc, Oso Flaco and Nipomo. It also includes a scrapbook-style collection of dairy photographs, recipes, songs and more. A book signing by the author will take place at noon Saturday at the Santa Maria Valley Historical Society Museum, 616 S. Broadway in Santa Maria. For more information, call 922-3130.

—Marilyn McMahon

On the Town

CASA by the Sea advocates for children

The reason I am so passionate about CASA is because of the board of directors — they are passionate about CASA." That's how emcee Andrew Firestone opened the CASA by the Sea fundraiser.

The mission of Court Appointed Special Advocates is to assure a safe, permanent nurturing home for every abused and/or neglected child in the county by providing a highly trained volunteer to advocate for him or her in the court system.

The enthusiastic board of directors, including president Tony Papa, Patty Santiago, Martin Lynch, Pat Aptaker, Judy Guillermo-Newton, Veronica Sandoval and Ryan Siemens, mingled with other patrons filling the ballroom at Bacara Resort & Spa: Kenny Hahn, Kristi Marks, Charlie Knight, Milt and Arlene Larsen, Shari Guilfoyle, Rob and Judy Egenolf, Pati Kern and Chris Frisina, Laura Williams, Marisa Demourkas, Janet Garufis, and Chuck and Stephanie Slosser.

The sea theme was carried throughout the decor, with spectacular tables topped with sea

blue tablecloths and sandcastle centerpiece. Patrons welcomed the opportunity to sport informal seaside chic.

Keynote speaker **Francene Kelly**, of Children's Council, laid out typical scenarios in which a social worker finds repeated calls of abuse and neglect, then goes for court protection and removal of infants, toddlers, children and teens.

"When CASA are involved, things go right: They break the multi-generational cycle of abuse. They change the course of events and the trajectory of children's lives are altered for (the) better. You will see a difference in lives — not only for the child but their children."

Each child in the foster system is assigned an attorney to look out for their best interests but typically only sees that person once a year for court hearings. The CASA contact sees the child every week.

"The CASA goes into the homes; they listen to the children. When parents go AWOL, when social workers get reassigned, when some foster parents give up, the CASA remains there ... as the eyes and ears of the court for the child. CASAs are

heroes."

Ms. Kelly explained that with a CASA, students do better in school — sometimes for the first time in their lives.

Event co-chairs **Robyn Parker** and **Jennifer Smithwick** told the crowd, "If you can't be an advocate, raise money for the advocates." Auctioneer **Todd Ventura** and his team helped the audience do just that.

Executive director **Kim Colby Davis** announced that last year, CASA had 261 volunteers working with 393 children — a 5 percent increase over the previous year.

She also told us a story so appropriate to the purpose of CASA: A man saw a boy on the beach at low tide standing among hundreds of starfish that had washed ashore. The boy was picking up the stranded starfish and throwing them one by one back into the water. "There are hundreds of starfish," the man said. "Throwing them back one at a time won't make that much difference."

"Well," responded the boy wisely, "I made a difference for that one starfish."

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ERIN GRAFFY / NEWS-PRESS

Martin Gore of Depeche Mode donated his signed guitar to be auctioned, which was won by happy bidder Mary Beth Myers. Funds raised at CASA by the Sea support the efforts of Court Appointed Special Advocates, which trains volunteers to advocate for children in the juvenile courts.

ON STAGE

From Bernstein to Beethoven in Goleta

Goleta Valley Community Orchestra will perform a free concert at 7:15 p.m. Monday at Wake Center's Thornton Hall, 300 N. Turnpike Road. The ensemble will play Leonard Bernstein's "West Side Story" medley, Beethoven's Symphony No. 1, Frescobaldi's Toccata and Gabriel Faure's Pavane. Artistic director Laurel Fryer will conduct the orchestra. For more information, go to www.facebook.com/gvorchestra.

—Dave Mason