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Breiner: man of many talents

Sheldon Breiner will be honored by Portola Valley at 'Blues & Barbeque'

by Marion Softky

Geophysicist, explorer, entrepreneur, archaeologist, marathon runner, open space advocate, photographer — Sheldon Breiner has made his mark in each of these roles.

But it's for his contributions to preservation of open space and geologic safety that Portola Valley will be honoring Mr. Breiner at its annual "Blues & Barbeque" celebration at 6 p.m. Sunday, September 10, at Town Center.

Since Sheldon and Mimi Breiner and their two children moved to Portola Valley the year the town incorporated in 1964, he has been a passionate supporter of its trails and open spaces. He says he has run every trail in town and some that aren't trails.

"I love exploring," he says, chuckling about leaving trails and heading out cross-country. "I don't have many friends that like to run with me."

Mr. Breiner was also one of the founders of the Peninsula Open Space Trust, and served on its original board. "Our first big gift was Windy Hill," he says.

Mr. Breiner, a geophysicist who lives 300 feet from a trace of the fault in Portola Valley Ranch, has chaired the town's Geologic Safety Committee during the recent study of details of the San Andreas Fault.

"Shelly's the go-to guy on geotechnical issues, and we're in a rift valley," says Councilman Ted Driscoll.

The Breiners have braced their house to withstand an earthquake, and installed a seismograph in their basement.

Mayor Steve Toben notes, "He's a force of nature himself."

Exploring

"I have always loved the outdoors," Mr. Breiner reflects. "Exploring has been a lifelong interest. I like challenges, puzzles, mysteries."

Mr. Breiner's love of exploring has taken him into deep science, from earthquake prediction to searching for minerals, lost submarines, and archaeological remains. He says he has visited more than 100 countries.

His love of challenge has spurred him into high-tech entrepreneurship. He founded his first company, Geometrics, in 1969. All told, he has started about five companies — "Two didn't work" — and now he's on the board of four companies, and principal of New Ventures West, an incubator for high-tech companies.

Magnetic pioneer

Shelly Breiner learned hard work early, helping his immigrant parents run a bakery in St. Louis. He did everything from decorating bar mitzvah cakes to delivering bread on his way to school.

At Stanford on scholarship, he took up geophysics. "Geophysics is a field for people who love the outdoors," Mr. Breiner says. "I like discovering hidden signals and physical objects."

Mr. Breiner's master's thesis launched him on a career using magnetism as a tool. He soon got a job with Varian to find uses for its new ultra-sensitive magnetometer, which detects minute changes in the earth's magnetic field.

From three trailers on the Webb Ranch, Mr. Breiner developed techniques to analyze structures deep underground by measuring changes in magnetic field due to the mineral magnetite in some rocks. Jasper Ridge has a major magnetic anomaly under it; so does SLAC, he says.

Soon Mr. Breiner became Mr. Find-it for the military, government agents, and mineral companies. He surveyed for — and discovered — oil in Iran and uranium in Australia. He's found sunken ships, tunnels in Vietnam, skiers buried by avalanches, and native American villages.

Mr. Breiner's doctoral thesis convinced him that magnetism may allow prediction of earthquakes. He set up arrays of detectors between San Francisco and Hollister to measure magnetic signals emitted when softened rock deep underground deforms as the Pacific plate moves relentlessly northwest at 2 inches a year along the San Andreas Fault.

Indiana Jones

Most exciting have been Mr. Breiner's forays into archaeology. These have led to discovery of the ancient Greek city of Sybaris in Italy; a hundred massive Olmec heads in southern Mexico; and remains of a Spanish galleon that ran aground on the west coast of Mexico 430 years ago.

Mr. Breiner used his magnetometers to detect the remains of the Greek city famed for decadence and luxury, which has given us the words sybarite and sybaritic.

It was his expeditions to southern Mexico to expose ruins of the area's oldest civilization that earned Mr. Breiner the unofficial title of the Indiana Jones of Geophysics.

The magnetometers were very effective at detecting the basaltic rock of the giant Olmec heads. Over three seasons, the team made 50,000 measurements and found over 100 giant heads and other objects — including the were-jaguar that anchors the Olmec exhibit in the Anthropology Museum in Mexico City.

In recent years, Mr. Breiner has been collecting fragments of Ming China, terracotta and beeswax from a Spanish galleon, and looking for remains of the ship itself.

Mr. Breiner never seems to run out of energy and ideas. Now he's working on a novel, and is preparing a paper on why airplanes may disappear in the Bermuda Triangle.

For information, check breiner.com/sheldon.

INFORMATION

Portola Valley's "Blues & Barbeque" event will be held Sunday, September 10, from 2:30 to 7 p.m. at Town Center, 765 Portola Road. There will be activities for kids,

music, line dance lessons, dinner and an auction. For prices and other information, call 851-1700, ext. 58. Also, you can go to AlmanacNews.com, look for the August 30 issue, and under Arts & Entertainment, click on Sheldon Breiner.