

This mom, wife, weightlifter, realtor, cancer survivor and former mayor loves her city
An interview-biography with Sue Swain Vaterlaus

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By Jean Bartlett

February 28, 2025



"I really love this city," Sue Swain Vaterlaus began. "I always have. It's so different from when I lived in San Francisco. It has been my experience that much too often in San Francisco, your neighbors could care less about you. But the people here in Pacifica are so kind.

"For example, when I lived in San Francisco, I gave blood at Irwin Memorial Blood Bank on Masonic. When I left, I walked to the corner to catch the bus and I passed out. Giving blood can cause a sudden drop in blood pressure. When I woke up, people were looking at me like, 'Ooh, there is a drunk in the gutter.' Everyone backed away from me. No one helped me at all and here I was, passed out on the ground."

In 1979, Sue moved to Pacifica.

"At the beginning of my real estate career, which was before cell phones, we still used pagers. On this particular day, I was standing in front of the Post Office on Manor. The sun was out and I was leaning against the pole waiting for the pay phone because I had an urgent page. A woman came up to me and said, so kindly, 'Honey, are you okay? Do you need a ride somewhere? I am so happy to help.'

"To this day, this is how I see the people of Pacifica. If you have a flat tire, someone will step up and help you. If you are in need of immediate help, or you look like you are, you will get that help. I see it even more now with Facebook. Pacificans step up for their community big time. That's how the people are here. They care about each other. They want to help. That woman I mentioned from years back, she didn't know me, but she was willing to put me in her car and drive me to wherever I needed to go. It's an old story that I still tell, but it still holds true of our 38,000 people. Pacifica is, in many ways, a small town."

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Susan Elizabeth Mythen Swain was born on April 12, 1954, at Alta Bates Hospital in Berkeley, California, to Robin Louise (Harper) Mythen and Richard Elmer Mythen. The family lived in Richmond on 36th Street, in the same house where Sue's father grew up. Sue is the second of Richard and Robin's three children: Cathy, Sue and Greg. Sue's brother Greg – a dad, partner, brother and grandfather – passed in 2022.



Sue's mom Robin, with her three children: Greg, Cathy and Sue, Richmond, CA, 1956.

Born in Oakland in September of 1928, Sue's dad Richard was the son of Irene Elizabeth (Conn) and Joseph A. Mythen. Richard's dad worked as a crude pumping foreman, and his mom was the organist for the First Methodist Church on West Richmond Avenue. Including Richard, Joseph and Irene Mythen had four children.

"After high school, my father headed off to the University of Colorado Boulder, which is where he met my mother. Both of my parents were educators."

Sue's mom, Robin, was born in Schenectady, New York, in February of 1931. She was the daughter of Martha and John Harper, and her father was an electrical engineer. She was one of three kids.

"I don't know much about how my parents met, but they married in Schenectady on August 17, 1952, and moved to Richmond before I was born."

When Sue was just barely 5, her father died.

"He and his best friend went sailing on the Bay and they capsized and drowned."

Their story ran in the *Oakland Tribune* on May 5, 1959.

The Coast Guard called off its search for two Bay Boat victims, both teachers – Marshall Smith, 31, of 2579 Moyers Road, and Richard E. Mythen, 30, of 550 36th Street, both of Richmond. They went sailing in Smith's 24-foot sloop Sunday and told their wives they would be back by 6 p.m. When they

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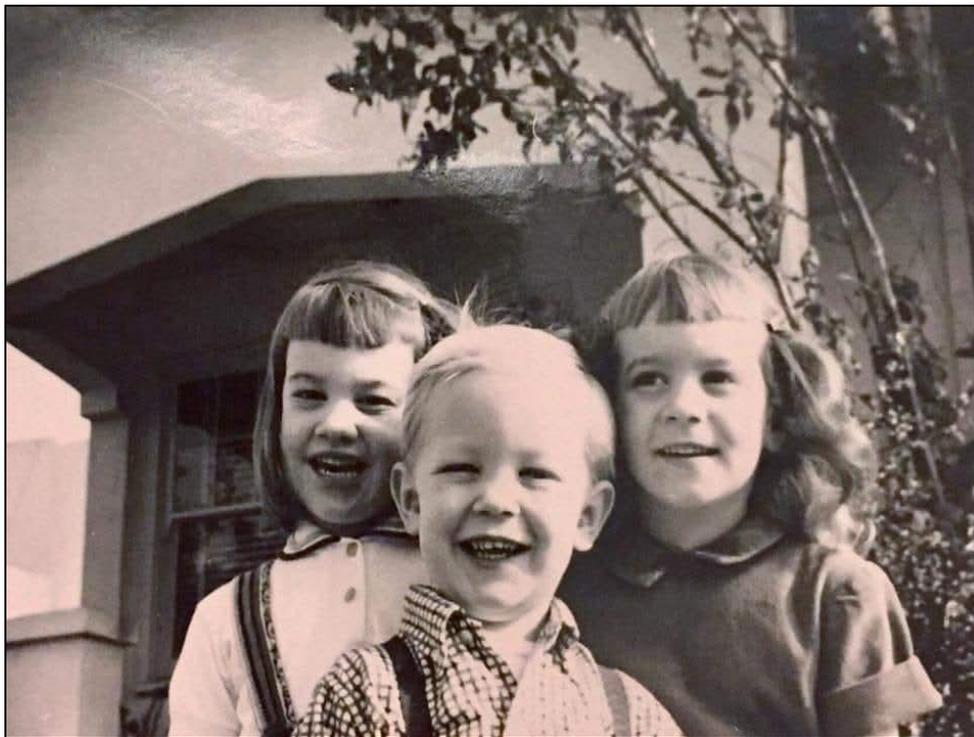
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failed to show up, the wives, Mrs. Anne Smith, 31, and Mrs. Robin Mythen, 28, called the Coast Guard. The sloop, keel up, was found in the Bay yesterday, following an intensive all-day search yesterday by Coast Guard helicopters and cutters, but no bodies were seen. Smith was a teacher in Woodrow Wilson Elementary School in Richmond, and Mythen was an instructor in chemistry at Contra Costa Junior College.)

"My mom was good friends with my dad's friend's wife, Anne, and Anne was pregnant. So her husband never got to see his baby.

"They found my dad's friend's body relatively quickly but they didn't find my dad for about eight days. My uncle would walk, back and forth on the beach, and then my father finally washed up. My brother, because he was younger, would say, 'When is Daddy coming home? When is Daddy coming home?' I remember that because it was very traumatic. 'He is not coming home.'"



Sue, Greg and Cathy, circa 1959.

"I remember very little of my father. I do recall being in Clear Lake, in a dump, and my father and my uncle were shooting cans and they shot a rattlesnake. We had this really old car, of course, because it was the 1950s. They laid the rattlesnake on the floor of the backseat. Now, snakes don't stop moving when they are dead. So the three kids – my sister, brother and me – were sitting on the seat, cowering as we looked at this snake on the floor. I remember that.

"I do have stories I learned about my father. He wanted to be a paratrooper but he was a real skinny guy. My aunt made him lead insoles for his shoes, to give him some weight, but he still didn't make the 'paratrooper' weight requirement. I thought he was so tall, at least 6 feet, but he was 5 ft. 6."

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When Sue's father died, her mom, who became a speech therapist, was working on her credential at San Francisco State.

"My mother learned how to drive, but she didn't drive when my father died. She would get rides with people from Richmond to San Francisco State. Who took care of us? We had a nanny who stayed with us all day. I don't know how my mom made it. My dad must have had life insurance. My dad's dad died before my father, in January of 1958, and my dad's mom died not long after his death, in November of 1959. They lived about five blocks away from us in another home they owned, and oddly, they gave our house, which they also owned, to my sister, brother and me. But I don't know their thinking or my mom's thinking. I do know we were so young, we couldn't really inherit a house.

"Because my sister, brother and I were alone a lot, until my mom met my stepdad, we really learned kindness. We were very kind to each other. We were also helped through this by our cat Tiger Lily. We loved her so much."

Sue went to Woodrow Wilson Elementary in Richmond, kindergarten through fourth. When she was in fourth grade, her mom married her stepdad, Robert Edward Swain.

"I liked my stepdad a lot," Sue said of Robert Swain. "He had two boys, Bix and Brandon, from his first marriage, and then, there were the three of us. We are all very close in age and we all get along. My sister Cathy is still the eldest, then my brother Bix, then me, then my brother Greg, and then my brother Brandon.

"We didn't too much as far as family outings until my stepdad was in the picture, and then we did a lot. We had a station wagon and we would put all five kids in the station wagon covered with blankets and go to the drive-in. We brought our own popcorn. It was fun! When I was 10, we drove – my mother and the three kids in one car, and we had a college girl with us for half of our drive – from Richmond to New York, to the 1964-1965 New York World's Fair. My stepdad drove with his two kids and they camped all the way to New York where we all met up. We did see my stepdad and his boys as we went across the country, periodically. I'm sure my parents had it all mapped out, and the World's Fair was amazing. We all had a fantastic time."

The Fair ran for two six-month seasons, from April 22 to October 18, 1964, and from April 21 to October 17, 1965. It took place at Flushing Meadows-Corona Park in Queens and offered 139 pavilions that represented 80 countries and 24 U.S. States. The ticket price was \$2.00 for adults and \$1.00 for kids.

"When my mom married my stepdad, we moved to El Cerrito, up on the hill. We lived on a cul-de-sac, and we had all these kids to play with in our cul-de-sac: six kids at one house, four kids at another, three kids at another, and so many more kids, plus the five of us. We played outside, all the time. Because the cul-de-sac was at the top of this hill, we didn't have to worry about much traffic. We had a basketball hoop in our court. One of the neighbors had a big old bell and at the end of the day, they would ring it: 'Dinnertime!' It was great for the parents and great for the kids. Other than the huge event of my actual dad dying, I had a good childhood."

Sue's mom worked as a speech therapist in the Richmond School District, and her stepdad was a principal at Berkeley High and Emeryville High.

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"My stepdad was really a dad to me, from fourth grade on. He was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1923. He never knew who his father was, and his mother picked a last name for him from who knows where. Her last name was Chamberlain, but she picked Swain as his last name. Maybe a Swain was one of her boyfriends! When he was a kid, he and his mom moved to Boron, CA, which is a little census-designated place in Kern County.

"He was a navigator in the Second World War. He didn't talk about it. He had a Purple Heart, but I don't know any of those details. I do know he and two other guys had to jump out of a plane. After they landed, some locals hid the three of them in a truck full of hay. At some point, along came some soldiers who stabbed at the hay. I wish I knew more. I do know that the people who helped them, managed to get all three of them to a hospital and then my dad and his friends made it out."

Sue went to Delmar Elementary for fifth grade and then to Portola Junior High School, sixth through eighth, both in El Cerrito. Her first foray into politics was in junior high.

"I went to public school and the girls had to wear dresses. Now this is back in the 1960s so the hemlines were short. At Portola Junior High we were told the hemline couldn't be any shorter than where your fingertips met your thighs. I have very short hands so did my dress cover my butt? Maybe, maybe not! My friend and I got upset about having to wear dresses to school. We went to the administration. 'We want to be able to wear pants to school.' And the administration said, 'Well, it would be distracting for the boys if the girls wore pants.' Yeah, right. My friend and I got it done when we went to El Cerrito High School. It took us about a year of fighting with the administration so that everyone got to wear pants, and in our sophomore year that change happened."

Sue did one typical kids' job when she was old enough, she babysat. Her other job was a family original.



Sue, senior year, El Cerrito High School, 1972.

"We had a tie-making business. We made big, wide, very colorful men's ties, which was a hugely popular style back then. 'We' is all five of us kids. We were paid piecework: if you ironed, you got this much per tie; if you sewed, you got this much per tie; and so on. My parents paid us. My dad sold the ties, hundreds and hundreds of ties. I made several thousand dollars and I saved every penny because that is how I was. I would, a few years down the road, put it to very good use in Pacifica. But we made ties all the time. Some of the siblings were into it. I wanted to make the money. There were so many good lessons in our tie-making business. You could see if you did more, you made more. We used upholstery fabrics and they were so loud. We sold them for maybe \$3.00 apiece, and they were bought because this kind of tie was in demand. Each of the siblings wrote down everything that we did so each of us would be paid accordingly. Many, many good lessons learned here.

"My family did some interesting things. Because my dad was a high school principal, we would sit around the table talking about birth control. My parents were liberal. Well, my mother was a registered

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Republican and my dad was a registered Democrat. They felt if they did it that way, they would get all the information on both sides. They were pretty liberal. My mother eventually became a Democrat. But from both of my parents, we were encouraged to be thinkers."

In high school, art was Sue's "favorite thing."

"I also did woodshop and I was just one of two girls in that class. I loved it. I made a loom in woodshop, and I strung it. We made wooden bowls and various other things. Our teacher was thrilled there were two girls in woodshop and he catered to us."

Following high school, Sue headed off to San Francisco State University and pursued art.

"At San Francisco State, I worked with a lot of metals. I loved that. Here's how I cheated at State," Sue stopped to laugh. "I took a metals class, and I took a textiles class and I took an Indian history class. I created a basket out of metal, copper specifically, and put this tube on the top with a big old hunk of my hair sticking out of it, so it looked kind of like an Indian basket. I turned it into all three classes and I got an A in all three of my classes. Kind of cheating, ha ha! I did receive my bachelor's degree in art, but I never used my degree to pursue art as a career."

At San Francisco State, Sue did her "second political thing."

"My roommate and I decided that we did not want segregated dorms for girls and boys, to be the only alternative. So in 1973, we got it approved. I stayed my first year in the girls' dorm and then in my second year, I moved into the very first co-ed dorm in the United States. We made the news. And boy, did we have fun. Also very much on the fun scale, Carol Fregly was our Dorm Mom."

Carol Fregly, Instructor, English (Emerita), City College of San Francisco, is a longtime Pacifican known by many locals for her wit, charm and love of history, the latter which includes a hilarious willingness to dress up like a cow to promote Pacifica Jack Cheese – a delicious, historical, hometown cheese that can be purchased at the Pacifica Coastside Museum at the Little Brown Church.

"My days in college were back when streaking was the rage and not so long ago, Carol gave me a picture that ran in the San Francisco Chronicle in 1974. It was a bunch of naked boys, and our very-much dressed Dorm Mom. The boys had been arrested for streaking. On the photo Carol gave me she wrote, 'Sue, aren't you glad you weren't in this picture!'"

"Now I am not saying I participated in this frivolity, but some of the women in the dorm, would fill a bathtub with bubbles, put the bubbles on their bodies and run down the hall naked to see who could get the furthest and still be covered at the end of their run. I think on-campus streaking is generally discouraged these days, or any streaking for that matter, but there's always some nonconformist!"

When Sue was still in college, she began working for lenders in banks and she liked the work. She also moved out of the dorms and into the Inner Sunset.

"I didn't need a car back then. We got to San Francisco State on the bus, and we rode bikes or walked to wherever else we needed or wanted to go. It was a great college experience and I stayed there, in the Inner Sunset, after I graduated."

Sue also continued to work for lenders, which as it turns out, provided valuable insight into her, as yet unknown, career in real estate.

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She met her future husband when she lived in the Inner Sunset. At that point in time, Brent Vaterlaus was playing semi-pro baseball at Big Rec Ball Field in Golden Gate Park and he was also working for a commercial art printer.

"Brent's girlfriend was my friend as well. They were dating pretty casually and I think Diane might have dumped him, but there were certainly no hard feelings on either side. Brent and I got along great. We were just friends. At one point, I was dating two of his friends. That's what you did. I was talking to Brent one day and I said, 'Brent, you've got to help me. Both of these guys are here at the same time.' And he said, 'You made your bed; lie in it!' It was all actually quite humorous. Shortly thereafter, Brent and I just started dating, and no, I wasn't still dating his two friends. As it turns out, Brent and I, once we started dating, really liked each other. Nobody cared, as far as any hurt feelings with his friends or my friend Diane. They were just happy for us."

In the late 1970s, the couple decided to buy a home. They couldn't afford to buy a home in San Francisco but they could afford to buy one in Pacifica. They have lived in their home in Pacifica's Westview neighborhood since 1979.

"You know that money I made and saved from making those big colorful ties with my family? That money was the down payment!"

On February 22, 1981, Sue and Brent married at Forest Hill Clubhouse in San Francisco.

"We had lived together for about seven years and I was pregnant. I wasn't really planning on getting married, but Brent's dad had died and his mom was not doing well. She lived with us and she was down to about 80 pounds. I said to Brent, 'Let's just get married since I am pregnant anyways, and we'll do it before your mom dies.' We were going to have a small wedding, but Brent just kept inviting people so we had about 200 guests. Our wedding was really lovely but sadly, Brent's mom didn't make it."

Sue and Brent's first child, Lynda, came along in 1981.

"When I had my daughter, I stopped working at the bank. Brent was working in sales and doing well, and, as it turns out, the bank I was working for, Homestead Savings and Loan Association, was in the process of being closed by Federal regulators."

There was a Savings and Loan crisis in the 1980s which shut down approximately one third of these associations, nationwide.

"Right after our daughter turned 1, Brent and I opened The Artists' Gallery on Manor Drive. Lynda had just started walking and she came to work with me every day."

This was also the first time Sue was a story in the *Pacifica Tribune*. That story ran on June 9, 1982.

NEW GALLERY PLANNED

There'll be a gallery opening soon—sometime in July—in Pacific Manor which will specialize in displaying works of art and craftsmanship. It'll be called, appropriately, The Artists' Gallery, and will be located in the brand new business building on Manor Drive next to Better Homes Realty, just around the corner from Taco Bell. In fact, the gallery is the first tenant in the new office structure; it'll be in the corner spot. Owners and operators are Susan E. Vaterlaus and her husband, Brent. They have a 10-month old daughter, Lynda, and have lived in Pacifica about three years. Both are

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Bay Area natives. They'll accept art works for display and sale on consignment, expanding the opportunities of local artists.

"We displayed paintings, and stained glass, and books, all of these were by locals, and we had people who did pottery. The late Maxine Gonsalves, who went on to serve on Pacifica City Council and was also a mayor, she was one of our potters. We only had our gallery for a couple of years. At Christmas it did great and I started to buy things for the store at craft shows, like little stained glass night lights and ceramic cats. The stained glass things that I bought, those always sold like hotcakes, but unfortunately, the personal art did not sell well. We were located across the street from Mazzetti's Bakery, in the space where Coastside Comics is now. I met so many Pacificans when we had that gallery and that was really great. But the gallery just wasn't making money, so we closed it."

Sue and Brent had two more children. Lauren was born in 1985 and Ryan came along in 1987.



Sue, holding Ryan, with her husband Brent in the background, stands picture left of her mom Robin, her sister Cathy, and kids Lynda and Lauren up front, 1988.

"In 1989, I decided to study real estate. I was going to be an appraiser because I thought with three small children it would be easier for me to determine my own hours. But in order to be an appraiser, you have to get a real estate license. So I had to learn all about real estate and I found then, as now, I love real estate."

Sue received her real estate license in 1990 and began her real estate career with Andy Breslin and Company. His office was located on Highway 1, next to where Pacifica Pet Hospital is now. Her first sale was on Palou Drive in the back of Linda Mar.

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"For half of the sale, I was on vacation. That's a realtor thing, Murphy's Law. If you go on vacation you sell a house. I was six months in before I sold a home, and I was absolutely thrilled when I did. In my early years of real estate, I used to cart my kids around with me. I had a minivan."

Following working for Andy Breslin and Company, Sue began working at Re/Max Arrow in 1994.

"Re/Max Arrow turned into Re/Max Dolphin," the broker associate realtor noted. "Re/Max Dolphin turned into Re/Max Star and now we are Re/Max Gold. I have worked for Re/Max for 31 years and have been in real estate 35 years. Re/Max was in Linda Mar for many years and now we are in Rockaway.

"Why do I love real estate? Every transaction is different than the last, so that makes it interesting. You are always learning new things. Probably most importantly, I really like people, and it seems people, including people I don't even know, often just come up to me and start telling me about their life. My kids can attest to that. We would be in Costco, for instance, and someone would stop me and tell me all about their problems. My kids would go, 'Mom, do you know that person?' Not really!

"Most of the time in real estate, people are happy either buying or selling. But there is one area where I recommend, if the seller can afford to wait, that they do wait. This is when someone in their family dies. A person should take a breath, grieving is a process. I also recommend to anyone in this situation, to talk to their tax person. I have had some heartache stories in this area. One guy, a friend of mine, phoned me on the same day his dad died. 'Sue, I want to sell his house.' I told him, 'No, it's too soon. You can't think about that now.' But he was adamant and you can't make someone listen. I sent friends over to talk him out of it, but he wanted to sell his dad's house. On anyone's house, if I see things they can do to make their house more saleable, I advise them on what those things might be. In his case, I told him to paint his house and get new carpets. But he didn't do it because it was too soon and he couldn't listen, and his house sold for less than it could have."

Among Sue's favorite real estate stories, is a home she listed on Pedro Point.

"One of the rooms in the house was a grow room, as in marijuana, and there were two sellers on the home. One of them knew there was a grow room and the other had no idea. The one who didn't know kept saying, 'Why don't you do an open house there?' And I said, 'Well.' But, I decided to do a one-hour open house. So before everyone came over, we made regular brownies in the house, hoping to disguise the pot smell.

"A lot of people knew the house had a grow room and the open house was packed. The people that came said to me, 'I'm not going to eat those brownies. Did you put pot in them?' No, I did not put pot in the brownies. But you just couldn't disguise the giant smell of pot in the house. We tried! But it was a fun open house and somebody did buy it, and I am friends with him still!

"Death, divorce, moving up, retirement, first home, second home, there are so many reasons why a person buys a home or sells a home. Another story regarding a family that sold too soon after the death of their parents also comes to mind because this time, everyone that came to the open house was pretty sure the deceased parents were there, trying to put the brakes on. In this case, children of the deceased parents came from out of state right after their parents died, and they decided they wanted to do a garage sale immediately. The kids had hung their folk shirts up on a sale rack and every once in a while, a shirt would quite literally, lift itself up and pop off the rack. There was a table set up with various items, and suddenly, when no one was there, an item would just shoot off the table. Now these people loved their parents, but they were grieving and they were rushing when they didn't need to. I did find myself whispering to their parents, 'Everything will be okay. Don't worry, they love you and they love the house, but they need to do this.' I don't know if the parents felt better but I did."

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What are Sue's tips for first time home buyers?

"Make sure you have perfect credit, low debt. Don't spend too much on your credit card or buy expensive cars. Choose a good local realtor, someone that you've heard good things about and someone that you like."

Sue also offers these recommendations.

"Think about your house, not as how you live there but how you would see it as if you were walking into an open house. Clean up the clutter, paint walls that need painting – visual is what counts. The front of your house is really important because people are standing looking at your house and first impressions matter."

As committed as Sue was to being a good realtor for her clients she was more than equally committed to being there for her kids. All three of her children went to Vallemar Elementary and then to Terra Nova High School. She was a Girl Scout Leader, a Boy Scout Leader, a Team Mom for soccer, softball and baseball, and Treasurer and Secretary of the Vallemar Home School Club. She was a constant member of the PTA. She also did something called, The Bookstore.

"There were no books, it was really a cart, but I had all these knickknacks that kids could buy every Thursday such as pencils and erasers. I was The Bookstore Lady at Vallemar for many years. Parents did it long before me and long after me, but it was fun."

At Terra Nova, she was the Secretary, the Treasurer, Mini-Grant Chair and E-scrip Chair for the Terra Nova Parent Support Team. She additionally served as Grad-Night Event Coordinator at Terra Nova from 1995-2005. She was on the Terra Nova Block Grant Committee.

"I was also the 'Tattoo Woman,' those would be temporary tattoos, at Terra Nova's Grad Party for eight years."

Sue served on multiple Pacifica committees and associations. She served on The Library Foundation Committee. She was a member of the Linda Mar Merchants Association and the City of Pacifica Site Facilities Committee. She served on the Economic Development Committee, the Pacifica School District Bond and Modernization Committee, the Pacifica Finance Committee and the Pacifica Connected Steering Committee. In 2008, she was one of 27 community members, local business owners and commissioners appointed to serve on Pacifica's General Plan Outreach Committee.

The purpose of Pacifica's General Plan is: "to establish a long-term vision for the community, addressing issues like new growth, housing needs, public services, and environmental protection... It outlines goals and strategies for land use, housing, transportation, environmental protection, and other key aspects of community life." All cities and counties in California are required to have a general plan.

"I worked on the General Plan all those years ago, and we finally got the General Plan done and that's a really big thing for a city."

Her involvement in "extracurricular" real estate work is also quite the volunteer résumé. Her service here includes: Board Director, California Association of Realtors, since 2001; she has served on the Board of Directors of the San Mateo County Association of Realtors, SAMCAR®; and the National Association of Realtors. She served as the President of SAMCAR in 2011. She has served on multiple SAMCAR

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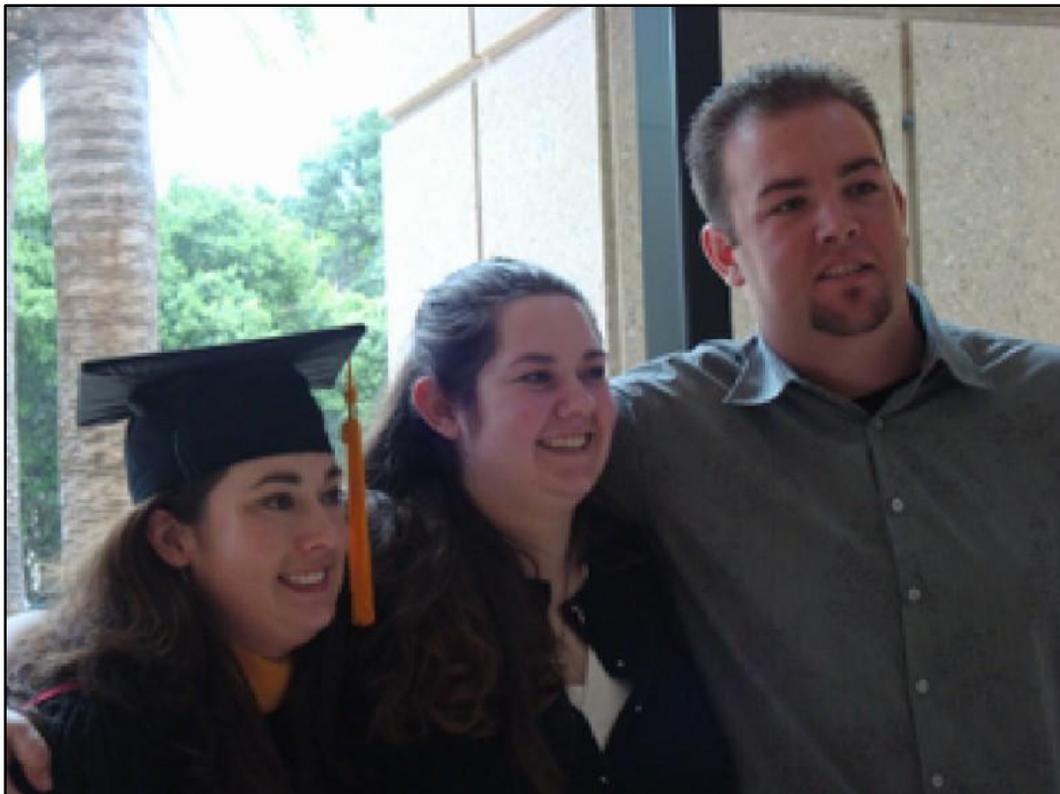
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committees and programs, too many to list here but they include: Special Events Committee, Service Volunteer Program, Legislative Committee, Grievance Committee and the Government Affairs Committee.

In early December of 2007, she was singled out among 3,500 realtors and named Realtor of the Year. At the event, which took place at the Hyatt Regency SFO in Burlingame, SAMCAR presented Sue with her award in recognition of a long list of meritorious criteria which included: "Her commitment to the promotion of good fellowship and fair dealings, and her natural ability to conduct real estate business and practices in the true spirit of the professional image."

"It was a pretty incredible night for me and on the same day as the event, in the morning, my oldest daughter defended her doctoral dissertation. It was just an amazing day."

Something Sue mentions several times throughout this interview, is how proud she is of the people her children are: Lynda, PsyD, who lives in Phoenix, Arizona, is a licensed clinical psychologist; Lauren lives in Seattle, Washington, and is the Swedish Medical Imaging and ER Registrar; and Ryan is a Real Estate Associate with Re/Max Gold in Pacifica's Rockaway business district.



Lynda, with her siblings Lauren and Ryan, received her PsyD from the PGSP-Stanford University PsyD Consortium in Palo Alto, California in 2009.

"I am also a very proud grandmother to Lynda and her husband James' daughter Jade. My family makes me so happy."

While it is hard to imagine, Sue extended her foray into hometown civic duty involvement even further in 2013. In 2013 through 2016, she served as a City of Pacifica Planning Commissioner. She never missed a meeting. In 2016 she ran for, and was elected to, Pacifica City Council. She served on Council from 2017

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through 2024, which included serving as Mayor pro Tem in 2018 and 2023, and as Mayor in 2019 and 2024.

"Why do I care about Pacifica enough to run for City Council? It is that same statement I began with, 'I really love this city.' I will say, however, it is very hard to be on City Council – way harder than I expected, and way more work than I expected. There is so much in depth background information needed to study on everything that comes your way. Maybe, originally, you had a strong goal, a particular passion, that helped push you to run for City Council. I did. I wanted a seawall, and that was the most important thing to me and I figured if I don't get on this Council, we're not going to get a seawall. But what I wanted didn't happen in the eight years I was on Council. In government you learn, as former Pacifica City Councilmember and Mayor Tygarjas Bigstycck said, 'Government works at the speed of government and government is like a snail.'

"That being said, I am really honored to have served on Pacifica's City Council. The very first thing I did, when I was first elected, still makes me so proud. In Manor, when people come off the freeway by the McDonald's, they come off driving 60 miles an hour. I hated that. It was so dangerous. I went up to the Public Works guy and asked him if he could put up some signs that said, 'Caution, cross traffic does not stop.' Public Works put them up in two days and they are still there. Now they have them when you go on the freeway by the RV Park. It's telling drivers, these people coming towards you are not stopping. I like to think I have saved lives because people fly off the freeway. And let me just add here, a personal pet peeve is I don't like that people don't stop at stop signs. I see it every day and it's just wrong.

"There are some difficult days on Council and sometimes, things do not pass that you hoped would pass. But you are there for your community, your city, and to be a part of that is very satisfying, because it matters."

As a Pacifica Councilmember you are a part of San Mateo County government. As such, all Councilmembers have the opportunity, or multiple opportunities, to advocate for their city within county-wide issues. In this regard, Sue's service to Pacifica included serving on the C/CAG (City/County Association of Governments of San Mateo County) Water Coordination Committee and the Legislative Committee. She was also a delegate for the Association of Bay Area Governments, served as the Chair of the San Mateo Council of Cities, in addition to serving on the SMC (San Mateo County) Office of Emergency Services Council and the SMC COVID Recovery Council. In December, 2024, Sue's two terms of serving on Pacifica's City Council came to an end.

"I recommend that Pacificans get more involved with our community. They tend not to get involved until one thing affects them personally. Then they have one goal, one objective, their thing that they are worried about today. It is not the whole picture. Once you get involved in politics, you work for the whole town, regardless of the fact that we have these District elections, you work for everyone. It is important that you have the big picture, not the small picture. Also, some things are not Council related. For instance, some people want the Council to fix what is going on right now in the Pacifica School District, which is a big deal. But that is not something that Council can fix or be involved with."

In January of 2025, the Pacifica School District Board of Trustees voted to close Ocean Shore Elementary School, a K-8. With this closure, kindergarten through fifth grade Ocean Shore students will be relocated to Sunset Ridge School. Sixth through eighth grade students will be sent to Ingrid B. Lacy Middle School. Additionally, the Board voted to move Vallemar School's middle school program to IBL. For both schools, these changes begin in the 2025-26 school year. These District closures have created a wave of community backlash that remains ongoing at the time of this writing.

* * *

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In 2002, at the age of 48—before she even had an inkling that one day she would be a Pacifica Planning Commissioner, or a Pacifica Mayor—Sue was walking by the Pacific Athletic Center (PAC) and she saw people lifting weights. She particularly noticed there were women doing this, women older than her, women the same age and women younger than her.

"They had a board up and it said, 'If you can bench 100 pounds, you can get up on the board.' I thought, 'I'm going to do that.' I used to swim and I have good shoulders, so I knew I could do it."

She hired PAC club trainer Chris "Topher" Stewart.

"I thought I would only work with him for a couple of weeks but the training never ended."

Sue became a member of the amateur sports team, the Pacifica Powerlifters. She benched those 100 pounds and her name went up on the board.

"It felt good. It makes you feel powerful because you can do something that a lot of people can't do."

Since then, Sue has broken records. She has set over 30 world records in the World Association of Bench Press and Dead Lifters (WABDL). She is a 16-time world champion. She holds several California State records, and seven world records in three different weight classes and three different age classes.



Monterey Bay Classic, 2020, age 65.



The powerlifter takes on a Pacifica truck!

In 2017, Sue was inducted into the WABDL Hall of Fame. In February of 2022, she was inducted into the City of Pacifica Sports Hall of Fame. Her personal best lift is 270 pounds.

"I never quit. I would be training with Topher right now if I didn't have a broken left arm."

Six months ago, Sue broke her humerus when she and a friend were walking in the north end of town, in search of whales.

"We were walking and I slipped on gravel stepping up on an unmarked ramp. Out of the side of my eye, I realized I was about to hit one of those giant sign poles. I think what I did was turned to avoid it, but I hit the edge and landed on my belly. Then I went to push up, because I didn't know my arm was broken. When I pushed up my arm went c-r-u-s-h and the bone nearly came out. Because of this I have peripheral

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nerve damage. Thankfully because of my weightlifting, I do not have osteoporosis or osteopenia, so my bones are fine. But the nerve damage requires a lot of physical therapy."

The physical therapy is painful. During this interview, Sue frequently bent her fingers, farther than she wanted to. She was told the cure would feel like she is breaking her fingers – which it does – but she won't.

"I've been doing this for six months and I have to do it all day. But I am okay with that. It is getting better."

The arm break is the closing chapter on her 'wild-ride' medical journey that began in the summer of 2023.

"I didn't want to talk about having cancer in the beginning, but I do now. When was the beginning? In July of 2023. I was on City Council. I was Mayor pro Tem and I had a mammogram the day of a Council meeting. The lady who did the mammogram, didn't say a word to me. But they called me on the same day. They said, 'We need to set up an appointment for you to do it again. How about in two weeks?' I was okay with the second mammogram but I didn't want to wait that long, which I told them. I called around and got an appointment at a different Kaiser the next day. Then my usual Kaiser called me and said, 'No, not a regular mammogram, we need to do a biopsy.' Oh, shit! My mother had breast cancer. My aunt had cancer seven times and my niece had breast cancer in her thirties. I went. I knew it was cancer. I booked the hour-long appointment at Kaiser in Redwood City because it was the first one I could get. You have to be proactive with Kaiser and I didn't want to wait two weeks and suffer.

"They thought I had two tumors but I had three. One was 2 inches, one was 1.5 inches and the third was an inch. They only discovered I had three when I went for an MRI. But the two they first discovered were good sized and I had had a mammogram 18 months before. They were very fast growing. When I had the biopsy in Redwood City, I could see the screen and I said, 'Oh, that's cancer.' They were on top of each other. I beat myself up for not feeling them. But I do the self-exams and I did not feel them and they did not feel them. It was only when they did the mammogram and the biopsy. The doctor looked at me, when he did the biopsy. I said, 'I have cancer, don't I?' He wasn't supposed to tell me. They make you wait. But he had a look and he said, 'It definitely looks that way.' Then I had to drive home. I walked in the door and I told my husband, 'I have cancer.' That was a shocking day. It was July 23, 2023. On August 1 of that same year, they were paving our street and I had to move my car. I stepped out of my car and cracked the side of my foot; I broke it. Then I walked the two blocks back to my house. I should have phoned my husband to come pick me up but of course I didn't. When I did see him, he took me and my broken foot to Emergency. I truly believe that was the universe telling me to slow down.

"When I went in for my MRI, they asked me if I could remove the boot and walk to the MRI machine. I told them, 'Absolutely not. I just did this. I am not supposed to walk on it for three weeks.' You can't bring your crutches into an MRI room because they are metal. You can't wear a boot because it has metal in it and the machine pulls because it is magnetic. I said, 'Oh, look, you have a rolling chair.' And they said, 'No, there's no back on it. It's not safe. We won't roll you over to the MRI machine.' My only choice was to take off my boot and hop over there with them holding me up on both sides. This concerns me. How do they deal with an elderly person who can't walk?"

Sue's mastectomy was August 29, 2023. She had her boot on during surgery as her foot had not yet healed, but that wasn't a problem for the surgery.

"I had the full right-side mastectomy; they did find a micrometastasis."

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Micrometastasis is a small cluster of cancer cells that have spread from the primary tumor to other parts of the body but are too small to be detected by conventional imaging techniques.

"I was told the micrometastasis was the size of a teeny piece of paper in one of my lymph nodes which they removed, they didn't find anything else. It was hard at first. I didn't want to look at it. You are used to your own body and you wonder what happened to it. I didn't look at it for three weeks. I had the surgery done very fast because it was fast growing. I did do genetic testing but they did not find any markers for breast cancer. The geneticist said, 'You've got a marker, we just don't yet have the genetic test for it.'

Sue missed very few City Council meetings.

"One of the City Council meetings was the night before my surgery. I was on the call, but I couldn't do it. I wasn't present. All I could think of was my surgery. But after my surgery, I needed to keep busy and be engaged, and all the meetings I attended kept me, me.

"The surgery itself wasn't bad. The chemo was horrendous. I was sick for eight days after each treatment and I needed four treatments. You are almost going back to have another treatment just about when you finish being sick. I would lose eight pounds every time. One day, I drank a glass of eggnog and that was all I could handle. Everything tastes like metal. I didn't seem to have a problem with lemon drops or graham crackers but at one point, I tried some Ritz crackers and I had to spit them out. Water tasted bad. Tea tasted bad. I had to carry a giant bottle of water around with me and drink it, regardless. Even now the water bottle grosses me out.

"The other thing that was horrible was after chemo, you have to go to the hospital to get shots in your stomach to build up your white blood cells because you have no immunity. You feel like you are going to throw up and you are dizzy and you have to go to a hospital where people are sick. I didn't want to go, but I had to go five days in a row to get these belly shots after finishing my last chemo treatment. It turns out there are other options. They can put a patch on your belly and it is time-released daily. Kaiser apparently does not have that. Kaiser can give you one giant shot so you don't have to come in every day for five days. I don't know why they didn't do that. Now, don't get me wrong, I love Kaiser, but I had some problems."

Sue also has mild diabetes, which is treated by oral medication, not insulin shots.

"For many individuals having chemo treatments, their doctor will also prescribe steroids. I was one of those individuals. Steroids will make your blood sugar go all over the place. My blood sugar went at one point to 500. I said to Kaiser, I want one of those patches so I know what my blood sugar level is, and they said, 'No. You've only had two incidents of really low blood sugar so we are not going to give you that.' That's like \$150 a month for two of those patches. Now I take a drug to kill cancer and I take another drug to kill hormones because I am hormone positive. The latter drug, I was taking two a day and now I am taking one. When I took two a day, the cost was \$16,000 a month, now it is \$8,500. While I do not pay that price out of my pocket since I have insurance, that price is disgusting. No one can afford that. Medicine is definitely a practice.

"I will say I was surprisingly happy with most every doctor except the plastic surgeon. He was insulting, dismissive, arrogant and condescending – completely out of touch with explaining his medical opinions kindly. When I left that meeting, I burst into tears. He was a pig. I did phone Kaiser. I said, 'Don't send anyone else to him.' But Kaiser told me he had retired. How many worried and overwhelmed patients did he do that to?

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"Once I was willing to talk about having breast cancer, I would tell people at the end of Council meetings, 'Go have a mammogram.'

"I lost my hair after my first chemo. I was washing my hair in the shower when it happened. It was an unbelievable amount. I had a sweater that was just thick with hair. That was hard to deal with and Kaiser does not give you a wig. But I thought, oh well, I guess it is time, and I cut my hair down to nothing.

"One of my friends bought me a wig because she had gone through this herself. Then I bought some cheapo ones: short, grey, dark brown. I hated wearing wigs. I wore one of those caps and when I did everyone would go, 'Oh my God, you have cancer.' Everyone was so nice but sometimes people's sympathy can be too much.

"My hair did grow back, thank goodness. I don't have to dye it and I am not going to dye it ever. I always wondered how I would grow grey and now I have and I am okay with it. My hair isn't growing much. I haven't had it trimmed once. But I wash it and leave it and that's what I did before. I'm good to go!"

Things continued to be bumpy medically for a while.

"After chemo, I had radiation. The radiation opened up my scar and I got sepsis. Oh, but before I had sepsis," Sue paused to laugh. "Is this too much information?"

The answer to that is no. Sue is well aware that the telling of her experience may well help someone else.

"In December of 2023, I had had a fever for weeks after chemo. The day after Christmas, I went to Kaiser and they said, 'Oh, you have a pulmonary embolism. You could have taken two steps and died.' They said, 'That's from the chemo. Take these drugs and you'll be better.' I did take the drugs and I was better.

"Then the radiation opened up my scar and I had a hole in my side, for months. The radiology doctor gave me some medicine to put in it. Eventually, I had sepsis and was hospitalized for 11 plus days because my body cannot handle IV antibiotics. You can't make this up!

"I did get better but then I started getting bad stomach aches so I was taking a lot of antacids. Finally, I went to the doctor and he figured it out. I had 40 gallstones – so, goodbye to my gallbladder. They didn't know why I had 40 gallstones. It was a thing that happened all on its own. Three weeks after I had my gallbladder removed, I broke my arm and we are back to the present!

"But here is the really important thing. I made it through and I feel like a healthy person."

Sue, in a seated position, touches her foot to her head. "And I can still put my foot in my mouth as well!"

"I never said, 'I am going to die from this cancer.' I always said, 'I am going to live through this cancer and I am going to be fine.' At one point I thought, well, maybe I shouldn't be on Council and maybe I shouldn't be the mayor. But then I thought, no. I finish what I start and I am going to finish this. If I had sat home whining and complaining and feeling sorry for myself, I would not have gotten to where I am now."

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In December of 2024, outgoing Pacifica Mayor Sue Vaterlaus, bottom row right, attends the Pacific Coast Television Red Carpet TV Auction, joined by fellow Pacificans, left to right, bottom row: Councilmember Mary Bier, Councilmember Tygarjas Bigstyeck. Left to right, top row: former Councilmember and Mayor Mike O'Neill, former Councilmember and Mayor Sue Digre, incoming Mayor Sue Beckmeyer and Councilmember Christine Boles.



On January 16, 2025, Sue Vaterlaus received three awards at the SAMCAR Installation Ceremony: Homeowner Hero for Elected Officials, Community Service Award and a plaque for serving as Region Chair for one meeting.

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"Throughout my medical ordeal, my children were so supportive and I learned, I can tell my kids' stuff. They want to know. They want to help. And my husband was so supportive. He was amazing. He shopped. He cooked. He made a bed for me in the living room so I didn't have to go upstairs. He hates the fact that I still hurt with my healing arm. He doesn't want me to hurt.

"Every morning, as soon as I turn on the light, he brings me a cup of coffee and half a banana, every day. He has done that since our earliest days. He's very sweet.

"He is not someone who socializes like I do. He is very happy with his family and his pets, although we don't have any pets at the moment. I have always been a cat person since Tiger Lily. But I absolutely love dogs too. Brent and I have had dogs and cats our entire time together, and we are so grateful that they have all lived good, long lives – 15, 16 and 17 years. Brent was so shocked that our most recent dog died at age 15. The thing about Brent is that even though he doesn't get out to events and occasions like his wife does, people still know him. He walks our dogs along the Sharp Park Berm. He stops to feed the birds.



Brent Vaterlaus with his dog Sierra and his son's dog Raider, are joined by friends along the Sharp Park Berm, 2024.
(Deb Wong photo.)

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"One of the other things I learned through my string of unfortunate events, is that one day you wake up and you just stop worrying about what you are going to look like and what is going to happen. You concentrate on enjoying life and feeling good and you know what, both things happen."



Sue in her Rockaway office, February, 2025. (Jean Bartlett photo.)



Jean Bartlett is a longtime Bay Area features writer: Pacifica Tribune, Oakland Tribune, San Jose Mercury, Marin Independent Journal, Twin City Times, Ross Valley Reporter, Peninsula Progress, Coastal Connections, Bay Area Business Woman and Catholic San Francisco. She is a former Hallmark Card writer, a produced playwright and a published author. Jean's writing has been recognized by the Board of Supervisors, County of San Mateo, for "connecting community and preserving local history."

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