

News Briefs

Out of Pacifica, California by features writer Jean Bartlett

Farewell to Pacifican Peggy Howell (1928-2019)

Shortly after her birthday in March of 2016, I interviewed Pacifican Peggy Howell for a feature story on her life to date. The story suggestion came from quite a number of locals who had become friends with Peggy through her coffee stops/chats at the Fog City Java on Crespi and her drop-in visits at Pacifica's Senior Center also on Crespi. The interview was everything I'd heard about her: fun, full of life, lovely. Peggy left this world on September 15, 2019. In honor of her memory, this 2016 interview is shared here.



photo by Jean Bartlett

Peggy Howell, wearing her birthday shawl, often begins her day with coffee and a non-glazed donut at Fog City Java on Crespi.



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From Asheville to Pacifica, Peggy Howell loves life

By Jean Bartlett

"As it happens my birthday falls on St. Patrick's Day," said Pacifican Peggy Howell, who just turned 88. "I'm sure there's a reason for that. I was probably born green."

Howell, who has lived not too far from Fog City Java and the Pacifica Senior Center since December of 2000, loves life, laughing, people and all of Pacifica, from ocean to hilltop and every spot in between.

"I belong in Pacifica," she said.

Born in Asheville, North Carolina, and raised in the suburbs of Alexandria, Virginia, Howell is the eldest of two daughters of Annie "Edith" Shields and Omohundro Pleasant Howell. Her dad was a craftsman cement finisher and did a lot of work in Washington, DC.

"One year he got a bonus and there was an article in the paper which quoted my mom and dad. It read, 'Now we can pay our debts,'" Howell recalled. "I never forgot it. It's one of those things that I have lived my life by. Pay your debts. Always keep your promises. A person's word is so important. I wish a handshake still really meant something."

To celebrate her birthday, Howell headed over to the Senior Center for their St. Patrick's Day luncheon and there was birthday cake from Mazzetti's, with green icing and a shamrock. Right after that, Howell went to a party at a friend's house in her honor. Her friend knitted her a "beautiful candy apple red" birthday shawl and many of her friends from Fog City Java joined in the festivities. She's a regular at the cafe and they know her order – almost always, black coffee and a non-glazed donut.

Howell is a veteran. She said she wanted to serve in the military from an early age.

"I didn't, however, enter the service until I was 30. I was too busy. But then I thought I had better get going or I might be too old to sign up."

A graduate of Mount Vernon High School, Howell first went to work as a clerk typist at Fort Belvoir, VA. She got married at 21 in 1949.

"My husband was stationed in Vienna, Austria, and I lived there for about a year," Howell said. "But dependents were sent home in 1950 because of the Korean War."

"I was only married six years but it seemed like a lifetime," she added with a guffaw.

Howell went to work for AT&T in Washington, DC. In 1958, she signed up with the Air Force. Basic training as a radar operator was in Biloxi, Mississippi. From there she was sent to the North American Air Defense Command, (NORAD), headquartered in Colorado Springs. It was a bi-national command, between the US and Canada, "centralizing operational control of continental air defenses against the threat of Soviet bombers."

"The only part of my training I used at NORAD was writing backwards."

Howell, along with several others, wrote up everything that came in on the teletype regarding nonresponding aircraft on a Plexiglas board that ran from the floor to the ceiling. She worked nine days on – day shift, mid shift and graveyard – then had four days off. On those days, she was out skiing or seeing the sights. She liked it all and she can still write backwards.

Her old job with AT&T was waiting for her when she left the service. She decided to transfer to San Francisco. It was 1961.

"I loved living in San Francisco. If you had told me then that one day I would be living in Pacifica I wouldn't have believed it. I went to Nick's back then. There wasn't much else in Rockaway at that time. I used to bring my cat Punkin. Punkin would walk on the beach while I had a picnic." (A lifelong cat fan, Howell currently shares her home with 'Apache'.)

Howell eventually got a job on the Peninsula with Varian, which is where she worked until she retired. Along with San Francisco, she has lived in Sunnyvale, South San Francisco, and when she first moved to Pacifica she lived in Fairmont.

"When I discovered the Senior Center here, I moved closer immediately," Howell said. "The nicest people work at the Senior Center and I have met many friends there."

Howell said she has limited vision now and if someone sees her and waves, they need to identify who is waving.

"It doesn't stop me from having a good time. I'll keep going until I can't and then someone will have to rewind me."