

# Diablo Honors.....

## Maryam Mehran

By Penny Adams and Mugs Freeman

Maryam lives in the first house on the left as you enter Diablo. She loves people and life and is one of the most delightful and caring women you will ever meet. She is Diablo's much loved and longest-term permanent resident and will celebrate her 100th birthday in January. Born in Tehran in 1922, Maryam celebrates being Persian. She was one of eight children, attended Presbyterian missionary schools and met her husband, Masud, playing tennis in Tehran. They were married in 1942 and immigrated to New York in 1944. After Masud's graduation from Cornell in 1946, the newlyweds wanted to become acquainted with America, so they rented a trailer and visited each of the then 48 states before settling in Montclair, California.



*Maryam serving a Persian delicacy in 1970*

The Mehrans moved to Diablo in 1955 with their sons, Alex, age five, and his older brother Casey. Masud, who founded the Sunset Development Company in 1951, built their first home in Diablo at 2001 Alameda Diablo. He and neighbor Ted Petersen, whose children also took the yellow school bus to Green Valley School, built a bus shelter for Diablo's children at the east edge of the Mehrans' property. Over 60 years later, during the current COVID-19 crisis, this bus shelter has become the Diablo Lending Library.

In 1957, Masud and Maryam bought and restored one of Diablo's most beautiful historic homes "Villa Valparaiso." The Villa has been Maryam's home for the last 64 years, and she still misses her dear friend Janet Cronin who lived directly across the street for 52 of those years. Their historic homes and lovely gardens on opposite sides of the entrance to Diablo gave visitors the feeling of entering a bygone era.



*Villa Valparaiso*

Both legendary ladies loved entertaining and were famous for their gracious hospitality. They also enjoyed many excursions to San Francisco for cultural events and shopping sprees at I. Magnin and Saks Fifth Avenue. Maryam fondly remembers that she often called Janet to suggest an adventure, and Janet would respond immediately, "Great! Just give me a minute to pack my suitcase!"

Maryam's son Alex, now chairman of the board of Sunset Development Company, remembers growing up in Diablo. The roads were rickety and almost impassible because of dips and bumps. There were no street addresses. Post office box numbers started at number 100, and the Mehrans' P.O. number was 131. Everyone shared "Party Lines" and the Mehrans' phone number prefix was "Vernon" or VE7-6869. The Diablo culture was that of a summer community with the feel of a summer resort. Young people rode their horses and bikes over the bumpy roads and swam in the reservoir at the end of Alameda Diablo, which was also Diablo's water source. The lawn north of the clubhouse was used for pick-up baseball and football games, and everything was family oriented.

Attending San Francisco Symphony, Ballet and Opera performances--including one starring Maria Callas--were special treats for the Mehran family, and Maryam thought them important to the cultural upbringing of her boys. Stopping at Blums for Coffee Crunch Cake was another treat. Alex remembers that it took almost an hour and a half to travel from Diablo to the city in those days. There was no Interstate 680 and only two-way traffic on the top level of the Bay Bridge. The bottom level was then used for the train.

Tennis became a big factor in their lives. Casey and Alex were good tennis players, so Masud and Maryam enthusiastically joined in family events. A photo taken by Diablo's legendary Tennis Pro and good friend Dick Overstreet shows Maryam and son Alex with Ginny Cuenin and son Judd in a Mother-Son tournament in 1968. Later, tennis motifs were prominent in Maryam's silkscreened designs.



Maryam is an expert cook and famous for her Persian specialties. One Persian dish she loves serving is Tahdig Rice. Tahdig literally means "bottom of the pot" in Persian, and Maryam playfully calls it "Burnt Rice." The finished dish is fluffy on the inside with a golden, crispy crust, which is the layer on the bottom of the pot flipped over when served.

Alex also remembers his mother baking special cookies and homemade treats for Trick or Treaters on Halloween and for Carolers on horseback at Christmas time. Riders rode through Diablo at dusk carrying lighted candles and singing Christmas carols, and they always stopped at the Mehrans' for homemade treats.



Maryam's regular bridge-playing friends included Janet Cronin, Martha Lee Smith, Jane Friden and Mary Harvey (of Rakestraw Books). She also loves reading and staying up to date on current events, politics and personalities. Until the disclosure of his clandestine and very shocking behavior, Maryam greatly enjoyed listening to Charlie Rose's daily interviews with authors, artists, musicians, politicians, scientists and sports stars every day at noon on PBS. Lyn Tiernan, who raises chickens and goats, even persuaded Maryam to consider raising exotic chickens as another hobby. Exotic Bantams became favorites.

When Maryam met then Senator Obama at her son's home in San Francisco, he focused his full attention on her and listened intently to what she had to say. She was very impressed that he was such a good listener. This can be said of Maryam as well. In conversations, Maryam focuses her lovely, dramatic eyes, inquisitive mind and often-playful personality on the person with whom she is talking. You sense that she is genuinely interested and really wants to know all about you.



After her divorce in 1978, Maryam attended the Rudolph Schaeffer School of Design in San Francisco where she studied design, silk screening and photography. After graduating, she started a business called "Maryam" in her Diablo barn where she designed and silk-screened fabrics with tennis motifs for tennis clothing and framed wall hangings. Surprisingly, these elegant designs are composed of multiple images of tennis rackets and balls and were hung in the Cal Club in San Francisco and the Diablo Tennis Shop. They can still be seen in Maryam's historic horse barn where boards of gleaming mahogany line the ceiling from which antique lanterns hang, and the 20 wooden stalls have decorative partitions made of wrought iron. The large, silkscreened prints are framed and mounted on the pristine walls of each long-empty stall creating an extraordinary showroom and a unique art gallery.

Always an avid gardener, Maryam decided to build a rose garden to honor her favorite Uncle Vali when he died over 25 years ago. Although she hired a distinguished gardener, her son Alex wound up designing the lovely circular garden and vividly remembers planting the three thousand rose bushes. The result was a hurting back for Alex and the spectacular rose garden you see today. With her customary generosity, Maryam has encouraged countless friends to come and gather roses for events large and small and often invites the happy rose gatherers into her delightful kitchen for a snack and a chat before they depart.



Another of Maryam's great gifts to Diablo is her maintenance of the acres of open pasture and barns that establish the pastoral setting as you enter Diablo. There have been no horses in the barns since the 1970s when Alex rode "Martha Horn" and "Queen Shirin," and play structures are now located in the center aisle between the stalls for Maryam's eleven great-grandchildren to enjoy, but the barns and the open land remain Diablo treasures.

When interviewed for this article by Penny Adams, her long-term friend who has been coming to her own Diablo summer home since she was a babe in 1944, Maryam's memories of her early years in Diablo grew a bit hazy. Typical of Maryam, instead of becoming frustrated, she smiled warmly at Penny and asked with twinkling eyes, "Couldn't you just make it up?" At 99, Maryam's memory may have faded a bit, but her spirit of fun has not.

What better way to conclude this story than with these words from Maryam's son Alex, "Thanks so much for honoring my mom. She is a special lady who loves Diablo from the bottom of her heart."



*Maryam and grandson Alex, Jr., a Diablo resident and President and CEO of Sunset Development Company, in 2017.*

***Sponsored by the Diablo Property Owners' Association***