

Mill Valley's Best-Kept Secret: O'Hanlon Center for the Arts
By Abby Wasserman

A best-kept secret can be a place no one knows about or no one wants *you* to know about, or it can be a place that's just bursting into public consciousness. That's O'Hanlon Center for the Arts. The Mill Valley non-profit art center, at 616 Throckmorton Avenue, has become, as Doris Day sang in *Calamity Jane*, "no secret any more."

A friend told me recently that she's thrilled to have discovered the place after living many years in Mill Valley, and I know how she feels. I arrived there six years ago to join the board and moved on to taking workshops, participating in art exhibits, and planning programs—and the more involved I get, the more I love the art center.

I love it for its natural beauty, openness, friendliness, and creative vitality. The atmosphere is definitely Old Mill Valley. That's Mill Valley in the '40, '50s and '60s, when laborers, teachers, and firefighters could afford a house, when traffic was light, and mutts were the dog of choice. Mill Valley welcomed artists, writers, composers, poets, musicians, and actors, and 616 Throckmorton Avenue was home to two of them.

Ann O'Hanlon was a painter and a teacher who founded the Art Department at Dominican College. Her husband, Dick, a sculptor, taught on the faculty at the University of California, Berkeley. They bought the property in 1948 and remodeled it into their home and studios. Ann began teaching workshops, and in 1969 the O'Hanlons incorporated their activities into a not-for-profit art center called Sight & Insight. That name was changed a few years ago to O'Hanlon Center for the Arts to reflect a broader, more inclusive creative focus.

At O'Hanlon Center we acknowledge that everyone is an artist, that creativity (and nature) should be part of everyone's life. We've created a community around these precepts. New friends to the Center attended our annual Summer Solstice party on June 23rd, enjoying music, art activities for kids, and the chance to explore the property, a partially wooded two-and-a-half acres bisected by a creek. Our monthly exhibit openings are the first stop listed by the Mill Valley Art Commission's First Tuesday Art Walk. These exhibits, which range from solo retrospectives to juried theme shows such as the annual "Wabi-Sabi" show (where almost anything goes), draw participants from around the Bay Area who are attracted to the O'Hanlon Gallery, once Dick O'Hanlon's sculpture studio.

With its two levels, expansive walls and high ceiling, abundant natural light, and sophisticated lighting system, it's one of the best exhibition spaces in Marin County. Artists also enjoy the mix of professionals and non-professionals who show there. Many of us have never entered the professional art world, yet, encouraged by the supportive and experimental atmosphere at the Center, we are inspired to do surprisingly original work. Workshops and programs are geared to people willing to try new things and take creative risks.

I know the secret's out because a lot of people come to our readings, workshops, performances, and special hands-on programs for families and children. The Center's a great place for collaborations, and programs often combine artistic disciplines such as movement and meditation, yoga and poetry, vision painting and collage. Some workshops focus on the inner creative journey. Some of our offerings in August and September will include Mill Valley poet Karen Benke's inspiring once-a-month "freewrite" sessions; weekly meditation sessions led by Vimala Sangha teachers Lew Richmond, Ed Sattizahn and Gib Robinson; a popular Saturday morning art workshop led by Cayen Robertson; First Sunday monoprinting workshops; and a new offering, "Altered Fiber Books" led by Ashley Helvey (August 26).

We're very excited about new children's programming. A semester-long Wednesday after-school expressive arts program for kids begins in September, and we're planning a summer art camp for 2008 to encourage children to explore their creativity in our beautiful natural setting.

Once you arrive at the Center, chances are you'll be hooked just as I am. The place is peaceful, liberating, exciting, *fun*. To some, it's sacred space. To others, it's an oasis. I love the fact that musicians, writers, painters, and photographers gather in the same place. It's a phenomenal community resource.

It also feels like home, which explains why so many of us take the next step to become members, and why we keep up our membership year after year. We want the Center to thrive. Members receive discounts on classes, a free exhibit in our Loft Gallery, and other benefits. And member and non-member alike receive the greatest benefits of all: a chance to awaken creativity, explore the arts, and find one's own creative voice.

O'Hanlon Center for the Arts is run by a board of directors who report to the members, and an Arts Administrator. Current board members include architect Cecilia Quezada, opera singer Tina Osinski, community center director Les Lizama, former teacher Anabelle Wasserman, and corporate consultant Peller Marion. Daily operations are overseen by Arts Administrator Megan Wilkinson of San Rafael, who came to the O'Hanlon Center from The Discovery Museum. Megan can be reached weekdays at megan@ohanloncenter.org. Call to request a program brochure or membership information, and to be put on the mailing list. The O'Hanlon Gallery is open 10-2 Tuesdays through Saturdays. You'll find us one-half mile past the Mill Valley Library in Cascade Canyon, a couple of turns short of Cascade Falls, on the lap of Mt. Tamalpais.

Abby Wasserman, current Board President at O'Hanlon Center for the Arts, is the writer/illustrator of *Tosca's Paris Adventure*, a picture book for children. She leads writing groups at the Center each September through May.