

# Do You Remember?



By Anne Homan

## Mel and Philamena Medeiros

Manuel "Mel" Medeiros was born on the tiny volcanic island of Pico in the Azores. His aunt and uncle in Fresno sent money to the island for passage to America for their oldest nephew. That nephew was too scared to come alone, however, so younger brother Mel substituted and arrived in California in 1920 at age 15, speaking only Portuguese. He worked in the vineyards in California's Central Valley, accruing enough money to repay his relatives and send for the older brother, Tony, and then their brother Tom. Mel moved to Pleasanton five years later: he had decided to become a barber. After completing a course at an Oakland barber college, he began to work for the Rose Barber Shop.

He met Philamena Lewis, who was born in Pleasanton of Azorean parents and was working as a beautician. They married, moved to Livermore in 1927, and started the Palace Beauty Salon and Barber Shop in the Palace Hotel at the southeast corner of First and L. When the old wooden hotel building was torn down just before World War II, Mel and Philamena moved their enterprise across First Street, keeping the same business name. Mel's shop was in the front of the building and Philamena's salon in the back. They operated the combination shop for 32 years at that location, 2032 First Street. A beauty salon is now on the site.

In the 1930s Mel promoted the careers of local amateur boxers, for example Max and Buddy Baer and Charlie Rezendes. Livermore aficionados opened a regulation 16-foot boxing ring in the old post office building in 1930. Another boxing ring was set up for training in the backyard of Medeiros's home on Sixth Street. In February 1935 Mel and his partner, Louis Santucci, opened a gym at First and L. It included a regulation ring surrounded by seats and bleachers. They invited boxers to use the ring and equipment at no charge as long as they agreed to appear in Livermore at monthly bouts.

Philamena co-chaired the March of Dimes campaign for 15 years with Judge Joseph A. Schenone. Her nephew, Joe Medeiros, recalled how happy she was when the polio vaccine was invented. She worked many hours at the Alameda County Fairgrounds dispensing sugar cubes treated with the vaccine. In 1930 she was a charter member of the Livermore Business and Professional Women's Organization. During World War II, Philamena and Mel often stayed up until the early morning intercepting messages on their short wave set from veterans who requested that their names and messages would be forwarded to their families and friends.

When world travel was again possible for tourists after the end of World War II, Mel and Philamena traveled to Pico in October 1946 for a five-month stay. The round-trip journey itself took two months: to New York City by train, to Lisbon by plane, to Pico by a very slow boat, and then the return. Mel had not seen his mother in 26 years; his father had died while Mel was in California. They visited with family and friends, including six-year-old nephew Joe Medeiros, and returned to Pico in 1948. They had no children, so on this trip Mel took his nephew aside: "My uncle asked me one night if I wanted to study." Joe's reply: "Yes!" Joe attended high school on the Azorean island of Faial and boarded with a family there—Pico had no high school. Mel and Philamena paid all his expenses.

In 1954 they brought Joe to Livermore on a student visa. Superintendent Ralph Wattenberger had to receive permission from the U.S. State Department for him to be a Livermore High School student—this was at the height of McCarthyism. Joe graduated in 1956 and attended UC Berkeley, where he majored in French and Spanish and eventually earned a master's degree. He began teaching in 1964 at the new Granada High School and became a U.S. citizen in 1970. He remains forever grateful to his aunt and uncle for their generosity. They not only financed his education but also brought two of his brothers here, and paid for the education in the Azores of another brother and sister. One of Mel Medeiros's favorite sayings was, "If you give a dollar to help somebody, you'll find two in your pocket."

Both Mel and Philamena were active in the Livermore Sister Cities organization; they hosted guests from Guatemala and traveled to Quezaltenango. Mel served for six years on the city planning commission and then was elected three times to the city council, serving from 1958 until 1968, including two years—1961 and 1962—as mayor. He died in 1968 after an operation for a malignant brain tumor. City manager Bill Parness said, "In all of the city councils I have worked for, this man stood high in honesty, dedication, and integrity." Joe Medeiros described his aunt Philamena: "She never met a stranger. Asked about her secret of long life, she always said that she never worried. 'I do my best and let God take care of the rest.'" Philamena died in 2003.

After the unexpected death of Mel Medeiros, the city council met at its scheduled time on December 2, 1968, but then adjourned, in honor of Mel, without doing any business. At the next meeting, the council unanimously passed a resolution naming the greenbelt area along the Arroyo Mocho from South Livermore Avenue over to Stanley Boulevard the Manuel Medeiros Memorial Parkway.

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