International House Berkeley Celebrates 80 Years of Peace and Understanding

By Martin Snapp
Columnist, Bay Area News Group

International House was founded 80 years ago despite the objections of many Berkeley citizens. According to *I-House, An Informal History*, published in 2006, 800 people were in the streets on the day the building opened, Aug. 18, 1930, to protest the scandalous fact that students of different races would be living under the same roof.

They feared that some of those students might actually marry each other. And those fears have been amply confirmed over the years by hundreds of cross-cultural and interracial couples that met at I-House and lived happily ever after.

One of those couples is Raj and Helen Desai (she’s B.A. ’52 & M.A. 54; he’s M.A. ’53). Helen grew up in Santa Ana, Raj grew up in Mumbai, and they met in the dining hall at one of I-House’s “language tables.”

“I was sitting at the India table, and that’s when my eyes fell on him,” she says.

Raj was instantly smitten, too, but he was too shy to ask for a date. So a few days later he sent her a note asking if she’d like to play tennis with him.

She beat him in straight sets, which is no surprise considering that he’d never played before. “All I cared about was getting that date,” he explains.

But he quickly learned the game, and they married a few years later. They played tennis together until they were well into their 60’s, and last October they traveled to Bhutan and climbed the 10,500-foot-high Tiger’s Nest to celebrate Raj’s 81st birthday.

Ken Taylor, MBA ’59, a grad student from Canada, met his wife, Pat, Ph.D. 64, from Australia, at I-House, too. After graduation, Ken entered the Canadian Foreign Service. “I-House was the launching of my diplomatic career,” he says. “Everyone there made us feel so welcome.”

And he returned the favor 20 years later when, as Canadian Ambassador in Teheran during the Iranian hostage crisis, he and Pat hid six Americans from Ayatollah Khomeini’s revolutionary guards and smuggled them out of the country under fake Canadian passports in a covert operation called “The Canadian Caper.”

Ken received a Congressional Gold Medal—many historians say Pat should have gotten one, too—and to this day, he’s still approached on the street by grateful Americans who want to shake his hand. “We were glad to do it,” he says. “We were delighted to have a chance to do something for the United States.”

Like many alums, Ken and Pat have maintained their ties to I-House. So has Christiane Cook ’46, who chose I-House as the place to hold her 90th birthday party on June 19. Christiane lived there right after World War II, when many residents were foreign students who had suffered horribly during the war. “There were Indians who had been tortured by the British, Chinese who had been tortured by the Japanese, and so on,” she recalls. “Some committed suicide while they were here, including a
That hopeful attitude has prevailed to the present day. Just ask Daniel Benoliel, J.D. ’05, of Israel who co-founded a debating society at I-House with Ziad Nakat Phd. ’06, an engineering student from Lebanon. Every two weeks, they hosted a debate on controversial international issues under a banner reading, “Listen-Argue-Respect.” “And, of course, we became good friends,” says Daniel, who signs his emails to Ziad, “your Jewish brother.”

Or Huda Ahmed ’10, an Iraqi student whose best friend at I-House is from Kuwait. “When they told me there was a Kuwaiti student here, I thought, ‘Oh my God, this is not going to be good. She’s going to have resentment.’ But when other residents introduced us, she was like, ‘Hi! How are you doing?’”

“It’s the spirit of the place,” explains writer Firoozeh Dumas ’88. “You never knew what interesting conversation you were going to have when you sat down at those wonderful long tables, simply by introducing yourself and having an open mind.”

One other thing hasn’t changed over the years, either: grousing about the food. “Let’s just say it was adequate,” Ken Taylor says diplomatically. “It’s never going to get any culinary stars, but what university dining room would?”

And that’s why, despite the suffering that many of its residents had endured, those post-war years at I-House are always referred to as “The Golden Age.”

“I never heard a word of hatred there,” Christiane says. “Zufikar Ali Butto (later Prime Minister of Pakistan and father of another prime minister, Benazir Bhutto) ate at the same table as the Indian student, and the Indian student ate at the same table as the British student. We all felt we were on the threshold of a better world.”

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