

She grew up enjoying symphonies at Stern Grove, then devoted herself as a volunteer after retiring

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Native San Franciscan Susan Leurey grew up in an Italian household where the stirring music of Puccini, Verdi and Rossini operas undulated throughout. When her mother took her and her sister to the summer Stern Grove Festivals, Leurey also developed a love of symphonies.

â??It took about 10 seconds after I retired to decide to volunteer,â?• Leurey said. â??As soon as summer rolled around, I was at Stern Grove ready to work.â?•



Leurey with another volunteer at Stern Grove. (Photos courtesy of Susan Leurey)

After graduation from college in Oakland, a successful career in banking and finance, a marriage and the birth of a son, Leurey couldnâ??t imagine being idle in retirement. So, she began volunteering at the San Francisco Symphony, at the library, in gardens and at Stern Grove, where her responsibilities continued to grow. Over the past 15 years, Leurey, 72, went from collecting donations at the entrance to selling memberships, handling surveys for grants and working at The Big Picnic Event, where generous doors are feted.

Five years ago, she got involved with the Groveâ??s Outreach and Education Programs for children ages five to 10. The weekday workshops â?? dance, drumming, poetry writing and more â?? are free.

â??My favorite role is to act as an appreciative audience member â?? the best duty of the day.â?•

A haven of nature in the suburbs

Leurey lives near Lake Merced not far from Stern Grove. Its 33 acres sit between 19th and 34th avenues along Sloat Boulevard, about two miles south of Golden Gate Park in the Sunset district. Festival goers enter at the corner of 19th and Sloat. Within 30 steps, they leave a treeless suburb for a eucalyptus forest with birds singing, and squirrels and chipmunks scurrying by.

Growing up, Leurey attended festivals on weekends with her mother, with whom she spent most of her time. Her father worked six days a week at his flower stand in downtown San Francisco. â??He worked so hard and was home only on Sundays, when he dozed,â?• she said.

â??I remember sitting on old green park benches in the meadow, where we would eat the Italian food our mother brought us for lunch,â?• she said. Her parents were born in North Beach, her grandparents in Italy. â??Now thereâ??s only a handful of those benches left.â?•

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Picnic tables remain but require a donation for use. The weekly Summer Festival, which began in 1938, brings in audiences of up to 12,000 to performances in the outdoor amphitheater.

One of Leureyâ??s favorite memories is one Sunday when Ramsey Lewis was scheduled to appear. The weather was threatening. Leurey couldnâ??t remember a time when a concert was cancelled, but she thought this was going to be it.

After a quick backstage meeting, before the downpour hit, the staff sprang into action. They covered the stage with canopies to protect the musicians and their instruments. â??As promised, the bell rang at 2 pm. â??It was on with the show!â??â?•

The grove was historically covered with marshes and sand dunes. After the mid-1800s, the marches were drained and the land put to agricultural use.

Eventually, it became the homestead of George Greene and his family. They planted eucalyptus trees as windbreaks and grass on the dunes to hold down the sand. The property was sold in 1931 to Rosalie M. Stern, who donated it to the City of San Francisco as a memorial to her late husband, Sigmund. She stipulated it be preserved as a public park where concerts and performances could be staged.

More than 800 volunteers make the Stern Grove Festival possible. When Leurey first started to volunteer, she was willing to do whatever was asked of her. She directed groups to their picnic tables, handed out programs and helped collect donations at the entrances and at intermission.



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Leurey helping with the gardening at the Merced branch of the San Francisco Public Library.

The concerts are free, but there are big expenses, she said. â??The musicians have to be paid and their lodging covered. The sound system has been wonderfully upgraded over the years.â?• Funds are also needed for maintenance. In 2005, Stern Grove underwent a $15 million renovation. With drainage improvements and erosion control, the outdoor stage and performance facilities were expanded. Terraces and additional bleacher-style seating built of stone walls were added.

Leureyâ??s latest duties, working with children and the arts program, are perhaps her favorite. Sheâ??s even picked up a few new moves from the dance workshops.

â??Iâ??m so glad I raised my hand for this,â?• Leurey said. â??The quality of the teaching is so high â?? people from San Francisco Ballet, the Dholrythms Dance Company of San Francisco, the Aquacero Dance company, to name but a few.â?•

Children arrive individually, and summer camps from Chinatown and North Beach attend in groups. â??As a volunteer â?? and there are just two of us that help with this activity â?? we register children and assign them to a group determined by their ages. At noontime, we move backstage to the kitchen where we prepare simple lunches,â?• Leurey said.

At the end of the workshop, Leurey and her partner distribute surveys to teachers and parents to gather demographics information and to get feedback on the program.

Leurey attended Mercy High School, a girlsâ?? Catholic school in San Francisco that closed this year. (â??My school friends and I canâ??t believe itâ??s gone.â?•) She majored in history and minored in music at Holy Names College in Oakland, graduating in 1970.

â??To fulfill concert attendance requirements, weâ??d pile into cars for the drive to UC-Berkeley noon concerts, driving around the anti-war protesters and wafts of tear gas.â?• She didnâ??t actively participate in student demonstrations but did begin wearing a black armband in opposition to the U.S. invasion of Cambodia.

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After college she decided to go into banking. The Savings and Loans were giving out lots of mortgages, and home ownership rose. She found the work to her liking, and with experience, focused on becoming a commercial loan officer. She rose through the ranks.

Leureyâ??s work at the Grove has enabled her to see the San Francisco Symphony, Ballet and Opera, as well as Smokey Robinson, Kool and the Gang, Janelle Monae, Joan Baez, and more. But even thatâ??s not quite as sweet as the people sheâ??s met and the friends sheâ??s made.

â??Iâ??ve brought in friends from the Symphony to volunteer and Iâ??ve made friends with people Iâ??ve met through working at the Grove,â?• she said. â??Each season, we gather, meet and greet wonderful new and returning volunteers and staff. Then, we help produce incomparable musical experiences for the public on each of 10 summer Sundays.â?•

Since Covid-19 precluded live performances, this year they offered â??Best of the Fest,â?• a 10-week series of video playlists and special surprises from the archives. They can be found on the Festivalâ??s website, YouTube, and Facebook channels.

Category

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