

Practicality atop an adventurous spirit has Potrero Hill resident contemplating eventual move even as she continues to build community

Description

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Even as she speaks, calmly, about uprooting herself from the neighborhood sheâ??s lived in for 39 years, Audrey Cole is still organizing lunch potlucks, clothing swaps, and cocktail parties to bring people together.



Audrey Cole hosted a recent cocktail party to which she invited neighbors and their friends. (Photo by Robin Evans)

An invite to a recent cocktail party at her Potrero Hill home encouraged people to bring neighbors. There would be drinks and snacks and a conversation about how to continue building community. Her home was packed, but people were so busy meeting and chatting that the organizing agenda never happened.

Nonetheless, with the matter-of-factness of someone who learned early to take care of herself and facing her later years, she figures sheâ??s probably going to have to move. â??Iâ??m not going to

want to put a roof on my house when Iâ??m 80,â?• she said. At 66, sheâ??s also had some health issues. â??Iâ??m like everybody else with the hip replacement and the arthritis and, you know, all the stuff thatâ??s a pain in the ass.â?•

She could downsize or move to senior housing but isnâ??t sure what her next move will be. It could be outside the city, or even the country.

Friends and family

And, while sheâ??d miss her friends, she says, theyâ??re slowly leaving her.

â??Friends leave for their grandchildren. Iâ??ve had friends die. Iâ??ve had friends go off to, you know,â?• she said. â??All of my friends are older, and theyâ??ll be leaving me. At some point, it will make sense for me to just take off. And the younger I do that, the sooner I do that, the better Iâ??ll be in what the next place is.â?•

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Cole introduces neighbors to her collection of non-alcoholic spirits, liqueurs, and cordials. Wanting to drink more water, she began adding them to liven the taste. Below, she demonstrates that just a few drops can make a big difference. (Photo by Robin Evans)



Still, sheâ??s weighing a future move against the need to keep an eye on her parents, now in their 80s and 90s, who live in their own home in Los Altos. â??Thatâ??s one of my biggies right now. Keeping them safe.â?•

Caregivers visit their home during the day, but they are alone a night. â??Sometimes they fall,â?• said Cole, who calls them several times a week, though â??they usually donâ??t answer. I told my mom you need to know how to call 911. Thatâ??s a minimum for you to be able to live by yourself. If you canâ??t call 911, you have to go live somewhere else and have people take care of you.â?•

That practicality is a Cole trait, honed as a child in Orange County with parents consumed with her two brothers, who were â??a big handful,â?• she said. â??I pretty much had to raise myself.â?•

It was practicality â?? and some synchronicity â?? that led her to abandon her youthful dream of being a ballet star to get a degree in linguistics. Sheâ??d spent her year abroad in France and discovered she liked the language more than ballet. â??Youâ??d have a language and no idea what it was, but you had to parse it out: This must be the verb; this must be whoâ??s talking, and so on. And it was just like working with puzzles, and it was just wonderful.â?•

A chance at dance



Cole went to college to study ballet. She abandoned it as a career but continued practicing for some 40 years. (Photo courtesy of Audrey Cole)

She had also been realistic about her chances in professional dance. â??I would have never been any good, really. I started too late. I was already a teenager by the time I started.â?•

Practicality surfaced again when she was considering her future. Traditional careers in speech pathology or translation interpretation would have required more years of education, she said. â??I wanted to be out in the working world.â?•

So, she went to work for an answering service and later computer retailers, taking every training opportunity possible. And thatâ??s what allowed her to start her own business.

Over 33 years, Audrey Cole Database Consulting served companies big and small. She also gave her time to causes local and international. For roughly nine years, she was a board member, including treasurer and president for a time, of the Potrero Boosters, long known for its success in keeping a lid on developer excesses. In addition to a professional organization, she belonged to the local garden club. She contributes to fight female genital mutilation and is on the board of a public health group working in the slums of India.



Cole and Dick Millet promoting the Potrero Boosters at the neighborhoodâ??s annual Halloween gathering. (Photo courtesy of Audrey Cole)

â??I wanted community,â?• she said. â??When you work for yourself, you donâ??t have any community. I also wanted to do good things and support things. Iâ??ve been a philanthropist ever since my very first paycheck.â?•

When she retired, she knew exactly what she wanted: travel and no more computers. She told her friends she would not be their tech support. She made herself available to her clients for a year, after

which, she told them, â??Iâ??ll be on a sailboat in the South Pacific.â?•



Cole with a friend in Fiji, one of many international trips she took after retiring. (Photo courtesy of Audrey Cole)

Cole had a yen for adventure at an early age. When she was nine, it looked like the family might move to Australia. Her father, a rocket scientist, was in the defense business and had been flying back and forth. Her brothers were distraught about leaving their friends and her parents were chagrined at putting them through such a big move. But not Cole.

Ready to go

â??They were so apologetic and Iâ??m like, Iâ??m grabbing my suitcases,â?• she said. â??I donâ??t even care where weâ??re going. It doesnâ??t matter. Itâ??s somewhere different.â?•

Somewhere different is more exciting than dismaying for Cole. Recalling a friend who at 75 â??just up and movedâ?• to San Miguel Allende in Mexico, she said, â??Iâ??m sitting here thinking, â??Wow, thatâ??s a younger personâ??s game.â?? But she loved it. If I moved to San Miguel de Allende, I would have 20 friends tomorrow.â?•

Whether Thailand or Portugal, places sheâ??s been investigating, it would be easy to find expat communities, she said. â??And you know Iâ??m gregarious enough.â?•



Cole on safari in South Africa. (Photo courtesy of Audrey Cole)

Cole, whose halo of dark curly hair tops a five-foot-one frame, has what you could call a bubbly presence. Ever affable and chatty, she has a vibrant and easy laugh. Sheâ??s an outgoing straight shooter.

Thatâ??s what her husband liked about her, she said.

She met Joseph Schaller at the ComputerLand formerly on Market Street. She sold computers; he was a database instructor on contract for the company. He had had a psychology practice back East before but turned to his other love after moving to San Francisco: building computers and fooling around with databases. He would be with her and work side-by-side in their home offices for 30 years.



Cole at the Cornerstone Gardens in Sonoma, which she visited with the Potrero Hill Garden Club. (Photo courtesy of Audrey Cole)

Sheâ??d taken the ComputerLand job at Christmastime, desperate for work and with unemployment running out. She had moved to San Francisco after being let go as a marketing manager for an

answering service in Orange County. Because of her language background, she had been considered for a proposed London bureau. It never opened but she had taken all the training programs they offered â?? hiring, firing, collections, facilities management. It was also the first time sheâ??d ever used a computer.

At ComputerLand, she took every class they offered, from IBM and AT&T and Apple, â??everything they gave me,â?• including databases and spreadsheets. Cole focused on specializing in relational databases like Microsoftâ??s Access that allow information to be categorized, searched and sorted in different ways.

Her next job was at another computer retailer, but when it â??went out of business in the middle of the nightâ?• and her paycheck bounced, she launched her own company with the handful of clients sheâ??d been working with.

Getting in business

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One was the American Heart Association, which was close to finalizing a database system it wanted. â??Weâ??d been working on it for a couple of months by that point, to figure out what they needed and put it all together,â?• she said. â??And they werenâ??t wanting to let that drop.â?•

Then she went to a ComputerLand still operating in Daly City and made a deal. â??I said, listen, in about two weeks, Iâ??m going to bring you, I donâ??t know, $15,000, $20,000 worth of business that you have done absolutely nothing for. And I want 10 percent of it. And they said, â??Oh, hell yeah.â?? â?•

That was 1985 and the start of her consulting business, which would later do work for PG&E and Alameda Countyâ??s division of Social Services and smaller businesses like a local Potrero Hill restaurant. Microsoft also hired her, she said, flying her all over the country â??to teach programming to professional developers.

But she called it all quits in 2018 after losing her husband to a sudden heart collapse.



Cole and her husband, Joseph Schaller, at a train station in Chicago. They met at the former Market Street CompterLand where they both worked. (Photo courtesy of Audrey Cole)

Even then, she was prepared. Sheâ??d begun plotting her retirement in the mid-2000s. â??We knew statistically he would die some 20 years before I did,â?• she said. He was 15 years older and had had a weak heart since childhood.

Heading off heartbreak

â??Weâ??d be laying there sleeping and Iâ??d look over at him and Iâ??d say, â??You know, one of these days heâ??s not going to be here. How does that feel? I actually tried to experience the feeling of loss, the sort of panic thing. â?¦ And I dragged myself back, you know. But I would practice that like practicing a speech or something. I would practice that over and over again because it was going to happen.â?•

She said it was one of the smartest things she ever did. â??It was amazing because when he died, I went, â??Oh, oh, I know what this is. Iâ??ve been practicing for this. It was absolutely mind-blowing.â?•

That instinct for self-preservation and preparation comes in part from her chaotic upbringing â?? she was the peacekeeper who also tried to stay out of everyoneâ??s way â?? but also from being â??just ridiculously precociousâ?• as a child, she said.

She was wearing makeup to school at 10. By 13, â??I said, wait a minute, what am I doing? Iâ??m spending 20 minutes in the morning putting my face on as a child. And I finally just said, â??No, none of this.â?? I stopped all this stuff. I stopped shaving my legs. I stopped putting makeup on and said, â??Iâ??m good enough the way I am. Letâ??s get, you know, letâ??s do something interesting in life.â?•

And that she did. She and her husband worked together and traveled together. They flew together, with Cole taking the helm of Cessna 150s through a local commercial flight group. And when he died, she began traveling.

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Cole and her husband with a Cessna 150 that they flew through a local commercial flight group. (Photo courtesy of Audrey Cole)

â??Iâ??ve loved to travel all my life,â?• she said. Sheâ??s spent time in South Africa, Canada, Mexico, and Argentina and would love to go back to France. She turned 22 in Costa Rica and said, â??Maybe Iâ??ll turn 67 there.â?•

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