North Beach tour guide builds on her own unique experiences at center of neighborhoodâ??s idyllic â??70s

Description

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Blandina Farley arrived in San Francisco in 1971 and fell in love â?? with North Beach. It was to be a long-term relationship, a kinship of spirits.

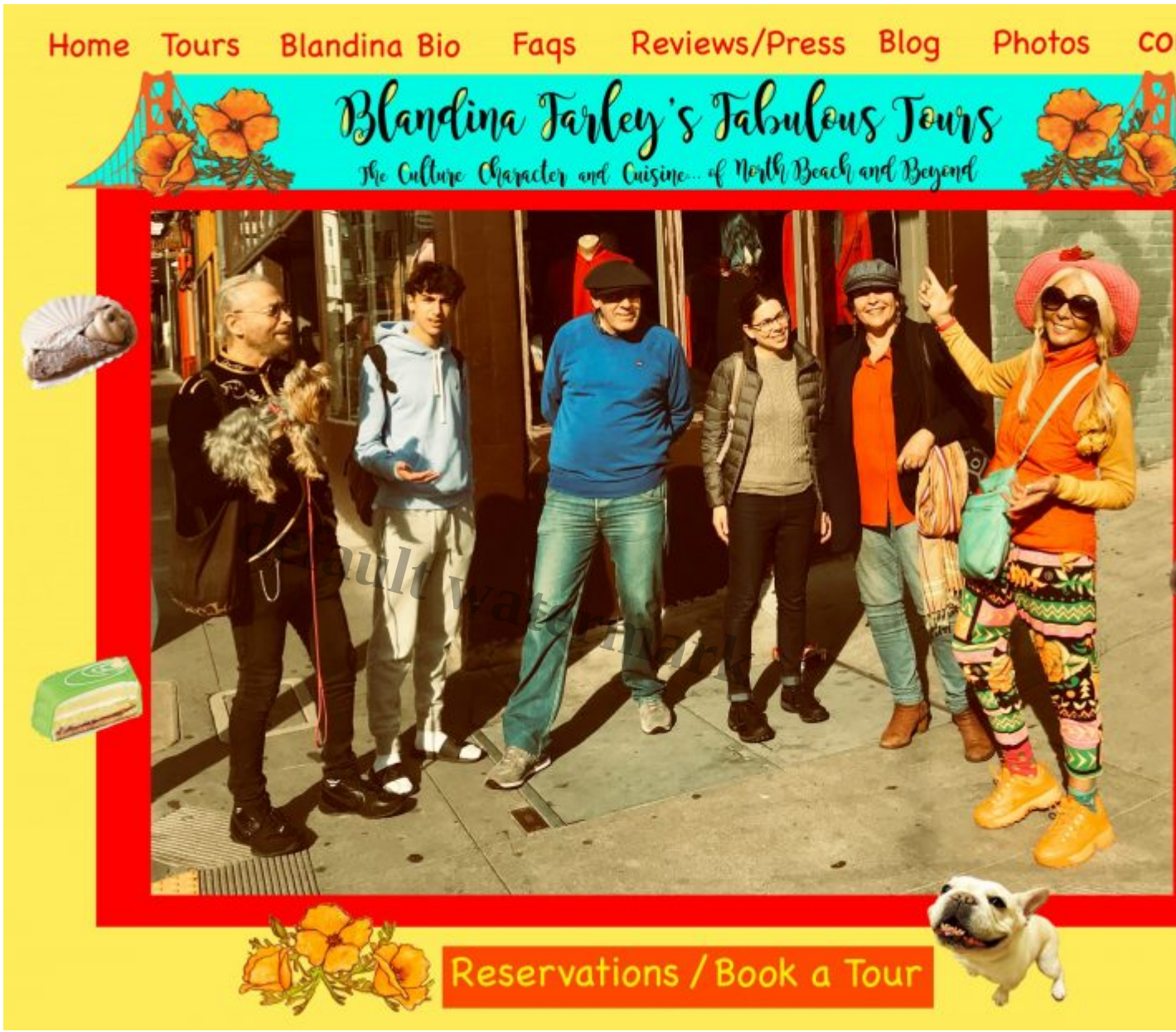
Home of the Beats, Italian immigrants, musicians, artists, writers and the strip club industry, North Beach in its heyday was flamboyant, full of color and passion. Lenny Bruce, the Kingston Trio and Barbara Streisand entertained at Enricoâ??s Sidewalk CafÃ©, which later hosted live jazz nightly; Finocchioâ??s Club showcased female impersonators; guests enjoyed chicken cacciatore and spaghetti carbonara at Vanessiâ??s.

Also known as Little Italy, North Beach is home to dozens of restaurants, coffee shops and bars, strip joints, including the first topless dancer. It is also famous as the birthplace of the Beat generation: Poet Alan Ginsburg was published by local bookseller City Lights; comedians Lenny Bruce and Bill Cosby appeared at the Hungry i club.

Farley happily fell into life in North Beach, which reminded her of her teenage years studying art and hanging out in Greenwich Village. â??I heard a lot about North Beach as a kid and it didnâ??t disappoint â?? filled with vibrating motion, art, music and writers.â?•

A great many stories

Farley, who had trained and worked as an artist, would go on to sing in a rock band, teach fitness and conditioning classes, lead tours of North Beach and then start her own tour company, â??Blandina Farleyâ??s Fabulous Tours,â?• focusing on the history and cuisine of the neighborhood where she still lives.



Blandina Farleyâ??s Fabulous Tours website.

â??I have a happy personality and I love to entertain and make people feel good,â?• she said. â??I know so many people in my neighborhood, and I have great stories from past times.â?•

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Farley left the city for short periods but was always drawn back to North Beach, where she had enjoyed a period of â??free-spirited innocenceâ?• and a binding closeness with an iconic shop owner who would encourage her aspirations and put her in the midst of some of her generationâ??s most famous artists and rock stars.

Farley fit in with all the creative types who settled in North Beach, being one of them herself. During high school, she attended the well-respected Arts Students League in Manhattan, and earned an arts scholarship to the International Fine Arts College in Miami, from which she graduated. In Manhattan, she hung out in Greenwich Village. In the â??60s, it was the hub of a revival in art, music, politics, literature and ideas. â??Andy Warhol was famous â?? Holly Woodlawn and Viva, actresses and artists, collaborators with Warhol, spoke at the Arts Students League,â?• Farley said.

After college, Farley landed a job in design for Cover Girl of Miami. Instead, she moved back home, and created advertising art for a New Jersey newspaper, she said. At that point, Farleyâ??s partner, a writer, convinced her to leave and venture out to San Francisco.

He went home after a short time, but she stayed.

Momentous serendipity

The Poster Mat in the 1970s. (Photo courtesy of Blandina Farley)

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Even though she was enamored with North Beach at first sight, Farley might have gone back to New Jersey had it not been for Ben Friedman, owner of the Poster Mat. A North Beach fixture for more than 30 years, he was a collector who sold records, then posters, from rock concerts at Bill Grahamâ??s Fillmore Auditorium and the Avalon Ballroom.

â??I was working in North Beach in The Waterbed Experience, the first store to sell waterbeds,â?• Farley said, â??until the business failed and Ben took over the lease.â?• She then worked for Friedman selling Raggedy Ann and Andy jewelry and pantyhose Friedman thought the women dancing in the strip clubs would like.

During this time, a group from New York City opened a store called The Poster Mat on Upper Grant across from Caffe Trieste. Friedman took over that store when the owners decided to move back to New York. Losing that lease, he moved The Poster Mat to 401 Columbus at Vallejo Street.

Blandina Farley and Ben Friedman in his shop. (Photo courtesy of Blandina Farley)

Friedmanâ??s fame followed his purchase of 200,000 posters from Graham and the Avalonâ??s entire 300,000 inventory from Chet Helms, manager of Big Brother and the Holding Company (he recruited Janis Joplin) and producer of free concerts in Golden Gate Park during the â??Summer of Love.â?• The purchases put his Columbus Avenue shop on the map as the largest purveyor of rock posters in the world.

Janis Joplin in San Francisco.

Celebrities like Joplin and Jefferson Airplaneâ??s Grace Slick and Paul Kantner as well as Rick Griffin and all the other poster artists frequented the shop and called Friedman their friend. â??He lived

upstairs from the store and stayed open late; the store was his living room where his guests would visit,â?• Farley said.

Farley worked for Friedman off and on from 1971 to 1996, when The Poster Mat finally closed. Even when she wasnâ??t working in the store, she remained in touch. â??He was one of the great characters of North Beach â?? a charming curmudgeon and a ringmaster of chaos,â?• she said. â??Life with Ben was never boring.â?•

Carefree and adventurous

People came from all over the world to visit The Poster Mat. â??It was like an ongoing party. Ben held court in his living room, six days a week. It was the opposite of a 9 to 5; weâ??d go out to eat when we felt like it. Everyone who came in was interesting.â?•

It was also at times idyllic. She lived in the Old Roma Macaroni factory on Telegraph Hill, where Friedman stored his posters. She watched over the collection â?? as well as his four dogs who didnâ??t have names. Her living space was the size of a basketball court with huge plate glass windows facing north, with spectacular views of Alcatraz, Angel Island, the Golden Gate Bridge and Mt. Tamalpais. She had a kitchen and a clawfoot bathtub.

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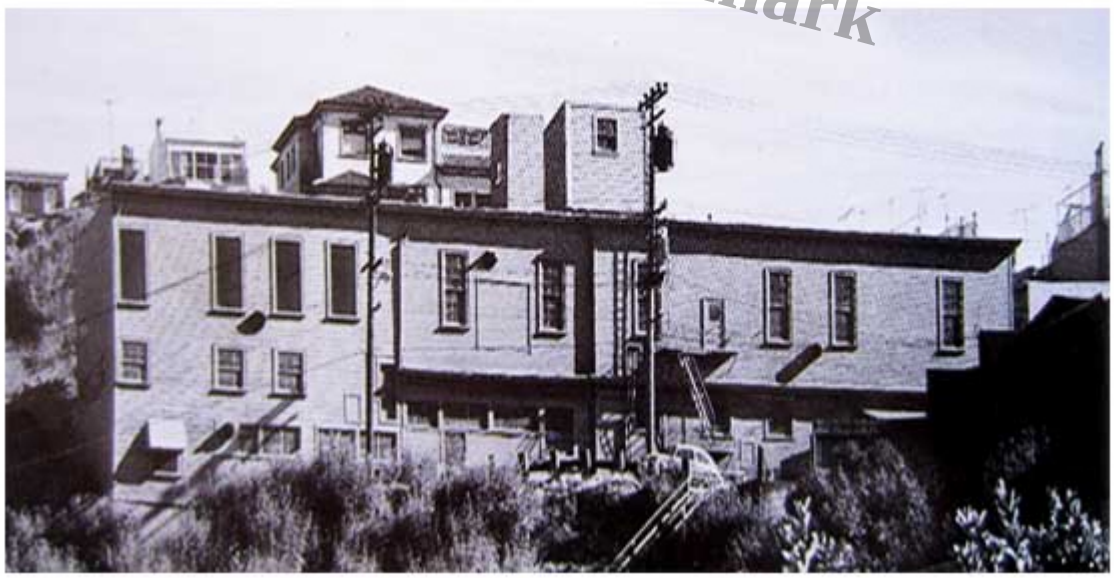

The Old Roma Macaroni Factory. (Photo courtesy of Blandina Farley)

â??I heard sea lions and the fog horns and watched the cargo and cruise ships come in and out.â?• That was her vantage from 1971 to 1978 as she enjoyed the carefree life of the North Beach counterculture.

Vesuvio Cafe

Caffe Trieste.

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A huge neon image of Carol Doda was the marquee for the Condor Club.

Farley painted, worked at The Poster Mat and hung out in places now must-sees on the tourist trail: Gino & Carlo cocktail lounge, Caffe Trieste, Vesuvio Cafe and The Saloon, the oldest bar in the city. When Carol Doda, the legendary first public topless dancer at the Condor Club retired, she played music with local musicians around North Beach. Farley joined in, singing jazz standards and blues.

In the mid-â??70s, Farley was offered a job as a vocalist with a band touring the Pacific Northwest circuit. â??Ben knew I always wanted to be a singer, so he told me to jump at the opportunity.â?• It was â??not really glamourous, but a lot of fun.â?• The band did cover tunes, rock music like that of Blondie and The Pretenders. She enjoyed the Oregon coastline and â??the vastly different rustic culture that this city girl was not accustomed to.â?•

In 1980, when the band broke up, Farley wanted to reconnect with her family and moved back to New Jersey. She stayed with them for a couple of years while she earned her certification to teach fitness classes â?? aerobic and stretch workouts, weight resistance and dance. â??My father was a physician, an athlete and worked in sports medicine and I inherited his love of movement.â?•

Blandina as rock star

But within three years, she felt the pull of North Beach. â??Without missing a beat, I stepped back into work at The Poster Mat,â?• she said.

She worked there part-time, while also the full-time Health and Fitness Coordinator at the YMCA in Chinatown. Farley had been working at the YMCA for about seven years when Friedman suffered a couple of strokes, â??the last one leaving him unable to hold court in his beloved store.â?• She left her job at the Y to take on full-time shifts at The Poster Mat. She also oversaw Friedmanâ??s health care. As his executor, she found him a place in The Jewish Home for the Aged in San Francisco, where he stayed until his death in 2003, at 91.

While tending to Freidman and the Poster Mat, she also fulfilled her lifetime dream of studying art in Florence, Italy. She enrolled in a small and affordable art school that offered a range of traditional classes. But, Farley said, â??the greatest teacher of all was the small streets and cobblestone alleyways where I walked and sketched daily under the warm summer sun.â?•

A trip fuels a dream

Through that experience, another dream began to emerge â?? that of becoming a tour guide in North Beach. â??I took a tour while I was there. It was so wonderful. Working in The Poster Mat, I was always giving directions and tips where to visit; being a tour guide of an area I loved so much seemed like a natural fit.â?•

Once back from that trip, she heard that the Chinese Cultural Center was looking for a tour guide in Chinatown. She got the job, with most of her groups comprised of children. She loved the wonderment on their faces, seeing Chinatown for the first time.

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â??Walking the alleyways in Chinatown, I could always feel its ancient roots, especially inside the aromatic incense-filled temples with their golden altars and the red lucky paper lanterns hanging from above.â?• It got her to thinking again about leading tours in North Beach.

As luck would have it, she found an ad in Craigslist for a guide there. Her interview took place in Caffe Roma on Columbus Avenue. The owners, the Azzollini family, were old friends. The tour company representative asked the Azzolliniâ??s if they would recommend her. They nodded in the affirmative. â??It was the easiest interview ever,â?• Farley said.

During the seven years she led tours for the company, she said she had many wonderful experiences, including a sighting of one of her favorite and famous tour guides. â??I was standing at the Chinatown gate, ready to start a nighttime tour when I saw a familiar face across the street. It was Rick Steves, the PBS travel tour icon.â?• Farley was a fan of his shows and had used one of his guidebooks in Italy.

Down but not out â?? a pandemic strikes

After many years of being employed by others, Farley wanted to â??strike out on my own.â?•

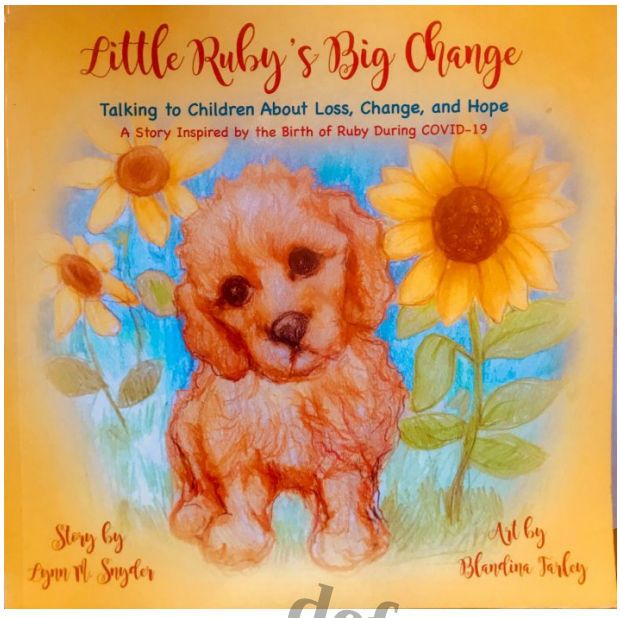
Farley today, biding her time with art.

Last year she did all the legal work to get â??Blandinaâ??s Farleyâ??s Fabulous Toursâ?• off the ground.

She was ready to launch when Covid-19 struck. â??I had booked my first tour the week of March 17. I had to give their money back,â?• she said.

Now, like so many others, she went on unemployment. Since then, her art has sustained her.

Sheltering at home, she created 20 watercolors. She attends Zoom life drawing classes with artists from all over the world.



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Her art graces two childrenâ??s books, â??Little Rubyâ??s Big Change: Talking with Children About Loss, Change & Hopeâ?• is about â??an adorable Labradoodle puppy who helps parents discuss the pandemic and other issues with their children to reduce fear,â?• she said. Written by Lynn Synder, executive director of the Common Ground Grief Center in New Jersey, it is available by emailing her. The 2012 book â??Benny the Beagle,â?• which Farley wrote, was a tribute to her parents, â??who rescued the real Bennyâ?• she said. â??It serves to teach children how to treat animals with love and respect.â?•

The Poster Mat also fulfilled Farleyâ??s love of art, especially the post-impressionists like Toulouse-Lautrec, who greatly influenced the artists whose work they sold â?? contemporary and turn-of-the century. â??We sold turn-of-the-century French posters, nobody else in North Beach was doing that. They went so well with the rock posters,â?• she said. Farley wasnâ??t a collector, but she has several posters from her time with Friedman. â??I love the colors.

â??Some of the rock posters Farley still owns.

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