

The Fountain at the Circle Lights Up the Holidays

BY KAREN MIREAU, AZALEA ART PRESS



Early December in the Berkeley Hills takes on a magical glow when neighbors gather for the annual decoration and lighting of the Fountain at The Circle on Marin Avenue.

Children especially enjoy adorning the four grizzly cubs that ring the fountain, with teens helping toddlers put the hand-crafted juniper wreaths and red velvet bows in place.

“They have a blast,” says Sara Holmes, former President of Friends of the Fountain and Walk (FOFW), the non-profit that maintains the Fountain. “It’s hard to tell who has the most fun – the kids or the parents taking the pictures!” Her husband, Harvard, concurs. “The Fountain appeals to the child in all of us.”

Originally installed in 1911, the Beaux-Arts design was the City’s first public work of art. It was destroyed by a runaway truck in 1957 and remained an untended patch of trees and brush until nearly four decades later when FOFW was formed to bring the architectural treasure back to life.

Rebuilding the Fountain was no easy task. Many elements needed to be replaced or redesigned. The whimsical bears, designed by animal sculptor Arthur Putnam, were patiently recrafted by artist and Berkeley Hills resident Sarita Waite.

Early in the process, Sara and Harvard devoted themselves to the project. FOFW raised over \$100,000 – the largest grassroots effort in Berkeley’s history for improvement of a public space. On September 15, 1996, when the Fountain was completed and dedicated to the City of Berkeley, over 3,000 attended.

Current FOFW President Michael Gray grew up near the Fountain and became a homeowner after it was reconstructed. He was so inspired that he started volunteering, then was invited to be on the board.

“The decoration of the Fountain is a hallmark of the season,” says Michael. “It gives everyone the feeling that the holidays are truly here.”

Volunteers gather the first Saturday of each month to keep the Fountain, The Circle and Fountain Walk looking their best. If you’d like to help with the website, fundraising or as a volunteer coordinator, please get in touch at: FountainAndWalk@gmail.com.

Karen Mireau, founder of Azalea Art Press, is dedicated to connecting communities of authors and artists — and to birthing beautiful books.

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Fountain Facts

- The reconstruction of The Fountain was the first joint project between a community and the City of Berkeley.
- The Fountain was designed by architect and poet John Galen Howard for \$2,500; at the time of the dedication in 1996 it was valued at \$175,000.
- The new Fountain was resurrected from old photos and an original Howard design drawing.
- 30,000 to 40,000 vehicles pass by the fountain daily.
- The poured-concrete bottom pool is 25 feet in diameter and made of 40 pre-cast pieces, each weighing 440 pounds.
- There are four underwater lights, with four lights on each of two tiers of the Fountain.
- The Fountain recirculates 200 gallons of water per minute in a closed system.
- The 7 streets radiating from The Circle are each named after a California county.