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They traveled different roads, but share one generous aim

IF YOUR business is chartering yachts for fancy cruises, “Man overboard!” is the last thing you want to hear. But on Oct. 17, 1989, the Loma Prieta earthquake jolted a passenger on one of Marti Diamond’s boats into San Francisco Bay, and the woman’s husband jumped in after her. Both were quickly rescued, but the man had dislo-

supported his shoulder. So she bundled him in a bedspread, put him in her new Mercedes and drove him to the emergency room. And since he was wet in addition to being injured, she then went to his hotel to pick up a change of clothes.

Great Lives

By ELAINE HESSER

cated his shoulder. So she bundled him in a bedspread, put him in her new Mercedes and drove him to the emergency room. And since he was wet in addition to being injured, she then went to his hotel to pick up a change of clothes.

That sort of attention to detail was something she learned in a one-room Chicago apartment she shared with her immigrant family. In fact, Marti and her husband, Steve Diamond, came from worlds that had one thing in common: neither involved smooth sailing. Vivid memories of those days are easily summoned — even in the living room of their cheerful beachfront home on Scenic Road.

Bettering lives

Marti and her brother were youngsters when their family came to the United States from El Salvador. She and her mother frequented thrift stores, and they all lived on a shoestring. At age 7, Marti learned to make tissue-paper flowers and sold them door to door in her neighborhood. Her mother, a gifted seamstress, ran an alterations business from home and taught her to reupholster furniture and refurbish used household goods. They also designed, made and sold custom clothing together.

“I could recycle before recycling was ‘in,’” she said. “It was my priority to make a difference to better my parents’ lives and make them proud. Watching our family constantly worried about paying bills, I wanted to achieve success and be financially independent. I did not have a clue how to accomplish that, but I was determined to find a way.”

Gifted

Her father, Marti said, had been an engineer from a prominent family. He was educated in England for several years and spoke three or four languages. After coming to the States in the wake of a family conflict, however, he sold auto parts for some time before Ford Motor Co. hired him as an engineer.

Steve’s family, was unlike Marti’s close,

supportive clan. “My mother was an alcoholic,” he said, and his brother also struggled with addiction but eventually recovered.

His father, a doctor, worked in public health, and they rarely stayed anywhere for more than 18 to 24 months. He was a successful hospital administrator, Steve said, but he was rarely at home.

“It was extremely dysfunctional,” he said, and his goal became simply to escape. A gifted student, Steve learned that Northwestern University and Tulane University took applicants who hadn’t graduated from high school. He chose Tulane because “I’d already lived in Chicago,” and New Orleans had to be warmer.

‘Took too long’

At age 15, thanks to a scholarship, he became an undergrad in theoretical mathematics and finished a pre-med program with minors in physics and chemistry in three years. He completed his M.D. and did his surgical internship and psychiatry residency at Stanford.

Once in practice, he became frustrated with the pace of the work. “It took too long to see results,” he recalled, so he used his earnings and borrowed money to invest in real estate in the San Francisco Bay area. There were “10 units, then 100, then 1,000,” Steve said, and he left psychiatry for the excitement of making deals.

While he was up north, he met and befriended the late Bill Mitchell (of Carmel Realty), who founded the Mitchell

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PHOTO/ELAINE HESSER

After decades of hard work, Marti and Steve Diamond have found joy in giving back to local youth.

LIVES

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Group in Palo Alto in 1975. Then, insisted Steve, “I just got lucky” with investments.

“Everybody told me, ‘You’re crazy,’” he recalled. Mitchell asked why he didn’t buy more affordable properties, but Steve said he preferred high-end places. Naysayers thought his timing was wrong, but in four decades, he has owned and managed commercial properties and thousands of apartment units across California, Hawaii, Nevada and Arizona, and he’s still at it.

While Steve built his business on land, Marti charted hers on the water — starting small and growing with the resourcefulness she learned as a child. It started with a relative who had a damaged boat. She bought it and fixed it up inside and out, relying on her sense of design and those childhood lessons in now-trendy upcycling.

After selling the finished product, she fixed and resold more boats, moving to New York and then San Francisco along the way.

Awkward moments

Her California friends said they wanted to take cruises on the Bay with food and entertainment, which led Marti to start purchasing and leasing luxury yachts. She said 13 banks turned her down for loans before she could build the 700-passenger San Francisco Spirit, but she finally prevailed. It was part of her fleet until she sold it to Giants Enterprises, which manages events at Oracle Park and other venues, and she partnered with the company to provide charter services for its clients. Marti also built the first dock on Pier 39 that met ADA standards.

At one point, she had four boats and often worked 100-hour weeks, sometimes pitching in with tasks like food prep. Guests’ compliments made her proud, and A-listers like Steph Curry have been among her passengers.

Nowadays, her Yacht Connections International has one boat for lease, the 92-foot Diamond Seas.

Marti and Steve’s romance began awkwardly in 2007. They knew each other, but when Marti contacted Steve on the advice of one of her clients, she thought she was making a business call, while he thought she wanted a date. He said that things didn’t merely “get off on the wrong foot.”

“It was more like two or three wrong feet.”

Steve, an art collector, said he made a faux pas by bringing Marti to an art gallery in San Francisco. The show there featured some anti-Catholic works, but she had been raised in the church.

“They bordered on pornographic,” they laughed, “and they were huge — 10 feet wide by 12 feet tall.” Still, she said, “I had to know more about him.” And they’ve been “pretty much inseparable” ever since.

Excellence, drive

For all they’ve accomplished, they still have plenty of motivation and energy to give back. According to the Community Foundation for Monterey County, their firsthand understanding of the impact that encouragement and financial support can have on someone’s future has led them to several philanthropic efforts.

They established a charitable foundation in 2017 “to support women, disadvantaged youth, and nonprofit capital projects that create lasting impact in their communities.”

The Steve & Marti Diamond Scholarship Fund, launched in 2022, has already provided about 75 renewable, need-based scholarships for high-achieving students pursuing four-year university degrees or trade school certifications.

They’re awarded for academic excellence and exceptional drive, character, and a clear vision for their future. Marti and Steve read the applications and often build relationships with awardees, following their progress long after awards are granted.

Their lives and the fruit of their hard work are, no doubt, a source of continuing inspiration as well.