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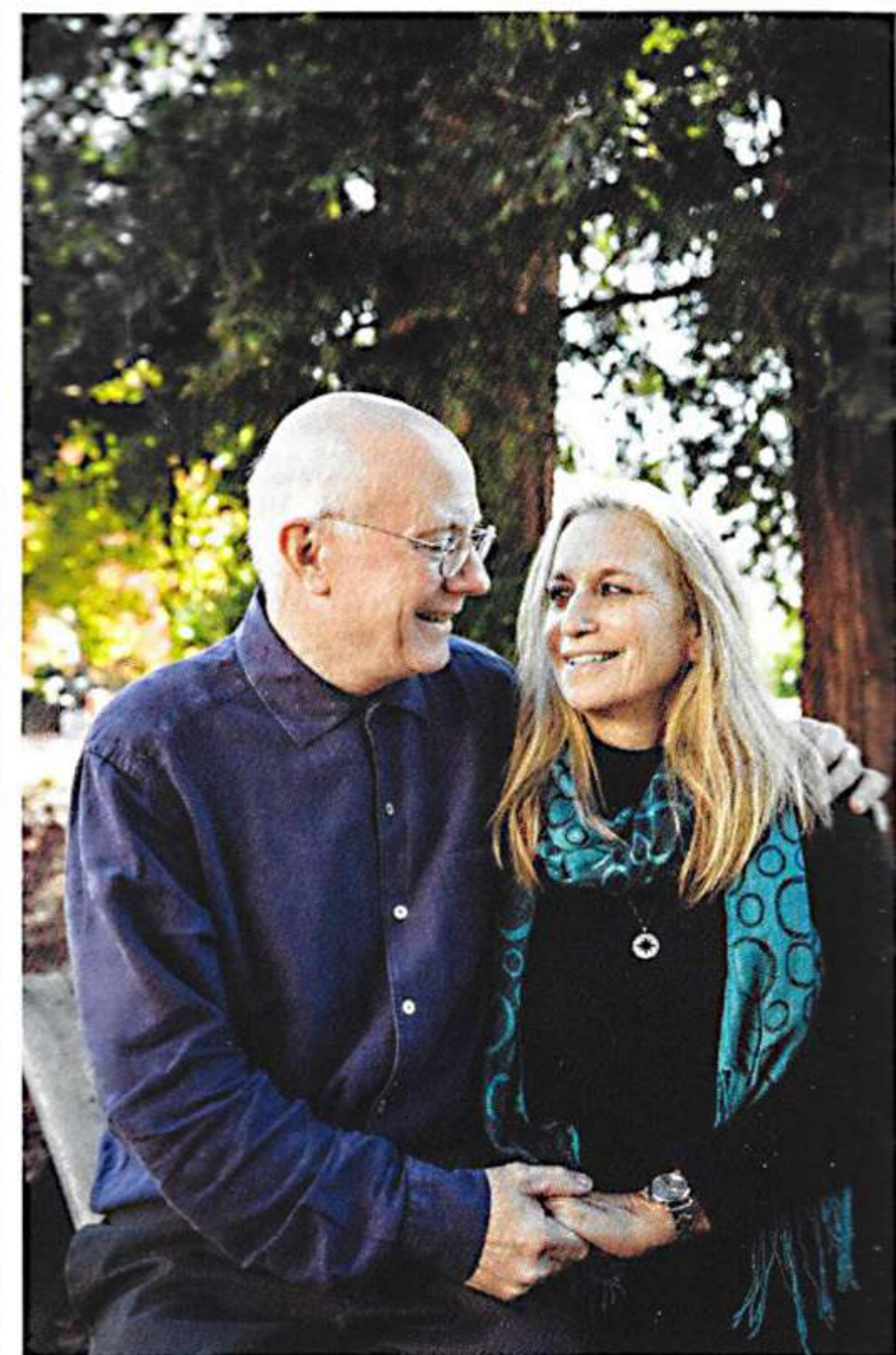
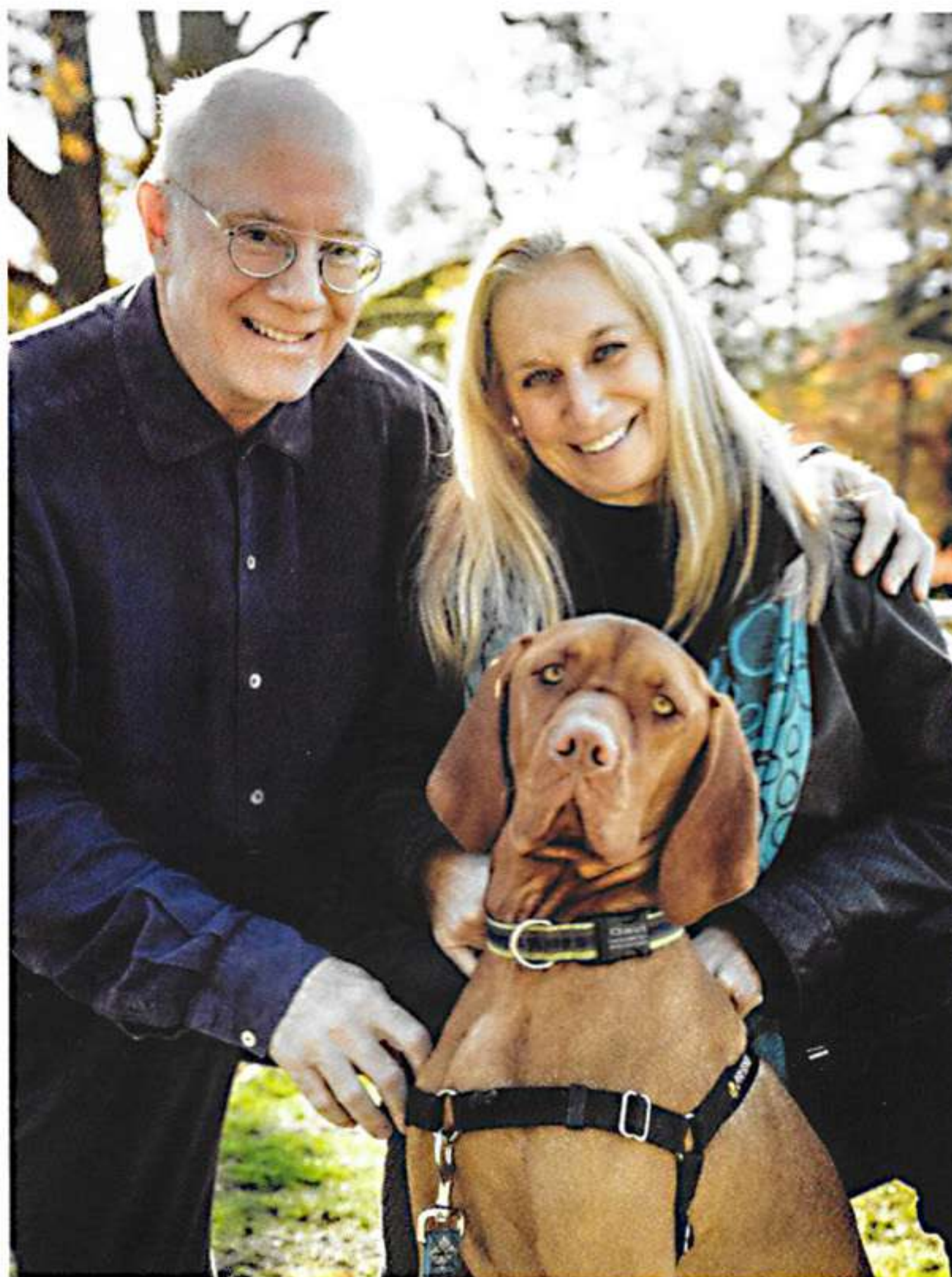
LAURA TALMUS AND ACE SMITH:

*Living with Purpose
and Making a Difference*



Best Version Media

Photo By Laura Kudritzki



Laura Talmus and Ace Smith: Living with Purpose and Making a Difference

By Kathy Petrocelli | Photos by Laura Kudritzki

On a chilly morning in beautiful Kentfield, I sat down with Laura Talmus and Ace Smith to discuss life, loss, music, family, and living with purpose.

K: It's so wonderful to be here with you both. You first became known to me through your organization Beyond Differences. I'd love to hear about its origin and its mission.

L: Yes, we founded Beyond Differences 13 years ago with the goal of identifying and addressing social isolation in youth. I served on the Kentfield Schools Foundation board and was involved in all the fundraising and volunteering at Bacich with my children. Social isolation was a problem that we first noticed in our daughter Lili, who was born with cranial facial differences. By the end of sixth grade at Kent, Lili was beginning to really feel a little bit sadder about going to school, and we attributed those feelings to the differences she experienced. But it wasn't until then that we were really noticing Lili dropping through the cracks academically and socially.

K: And was that due to that social isolation you referenced?

L: Yes. What wasn't recognizable in those days was that isolation could be as hurtful and painful as if you were being aggressively teased. Nobody teased or bullied Lili, but what we now know today is that there are psychological, academic, and sometimes medical implications in children who feel socially isolated. So it

led us to make the painful decision to homeschool Lili for a couple of years until she could regain her sense of confidence. Tragically, about seven weeks after she went to high school, we received a phone call that she had passed away in her out of state dormitory. It was an awful, absolutely horrific time in our lives where for many, many months, and still a couple of years later, it was hard to wrap our brains around losing Lili - who was, besides our son, everything in the world to us.

But beautifully, we decided to throw a community barbecue in her honor, six months after she passed, on what would've been her 16th birthday. And we had about 170 people show up, everybody singing and remembering and celebrating Lili. We played a small video about what Lili felt like in middle school. And that video turned out so well that we wondered whether we might use it to show children and hear their reactions. We went back to Kent Middle School, and asked Principal Skip Kniesche whether we could do an assembly. He and Vice Principal Jenny Walsh said yes. And that began what became a student-led movement to talk about this. About eight of Lili's former friends and classmates stepped forward and said, "We had no idea Lili felt this way, but we want to help." And that was how Beyond Differences got started. One assembly, one video, the life of one child.

K: Wow. What a beautiful way to honor Lili's legacy, working to help alleviate this pain of isolation that is



so pervasive. I'd love to hear about three initiatives in your program: **No One Eats Alone, Be Kind Online, and Know Your Classmates.**

L: No One Eats Alone is our signature program, and emphasizes what you can do when you make new friends at lunch or during the social times of the school day. We send out free toolkits to schools with a teachers' curriculum, an art project, and a student leadership unit. It's beautiful to see what the school comes up with and how they create a sense of belonging within their community.

Be Kind Online addresses the identification and disruption of social isolation online. It's a 24/7 challenge for parents and the community because children get triggered by what's said or not said about them online. We teach them how to be positive and inclusive, how to identify social isolation, and to remember to be kind online. We teach children how to feel confident enough to express themselves in the most positive way possible and become leaders and role models.

And Know Your Classmates is an initiative that works towards helping students make new friends at the beginning of the school year.

K: These are all so important, particularly during middle school, when kids are really finding their own identities and learning where they fit in - and of course in the context of the pandemic, as kids emerge from a uniquely challenging and isolating period of time in their lives.

L: That's exactly right. We're grateful for the support of a wonderful corporate sponsor, the Centene Charitable Foundation, who

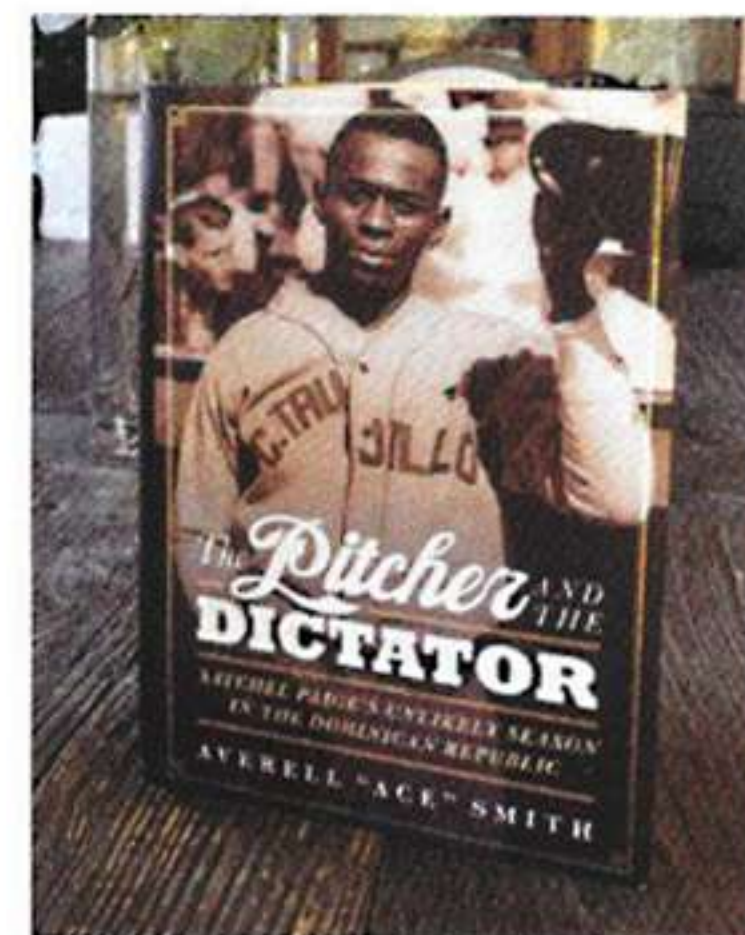
funds No One Eats Alone. Our training for teachers is now being used in over 10,000 schools in all 50 states. We have almost 800 schools alone in the five boroughs of New York City that use our curriculum. But were it not for Marin Superintendent Mary Jane Burke, we would not have gotten our start. She said yes to us as a new program when everyone else said no. She opened the door.

K: That's lovely. As a mom of teenagers, I really thank you both for what you're doing on behalf of all our children. Ace, I know you sit on the board of Beyond Differences, and are very busy in your work as a political strategist, yet somehow you've found the time to become an author as well. Can you talk about the book you've written, "The Pitcher and the Dictator," as well as any other upcoming projects?

A: Well, I enjoy pursuing things that deeply interest me and that I have a passion for.

In 2005, I bought a book called "Satchel Paige's America," which recounts the story of Paige's trip to the Dominican Republic in 1937 to play a baseball tournament. I was intrigued and wanted to find out more, so I went down to the Dominican Republic to research further.

My book explores the history of Paige and Dictator Trujillo, but also the historical trajectory and race relations of that country. You had Satchel Paige coming from the American deep south and traveling to a country with one of the most restrictive, oppressive dictatorships in the world at time - yet ironically perhaps experiencing more freedom in that dictatorship than they had in the United States in the 1930s.



K: So baseball is the backdrop for this book, but the story is clearly so much bigger than that. And you're working on another book now?

A: Yes, I'm working on a book about the origins of sound recording, its impact on society and culture and music, and the questions that raises. For instance, does jazz become anything more than a backwater genre that is of minor significance without recorded sound? Without records being produced and brought to Europe by the Americans fighting World War I, does it still become a worldwide phenomenon?

And then I deal with a lot about the origins of recording. I think that the story of how sound recording came to be has never been fully culled, so I dive much further into the history there.



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K: That's fascinating. And it's so interesting that when you find a subject that intrigues you, you really do a deep dive into thinking about its historical context and its cultural implications. With all that you both are involved in, how do you find that life balance, and how do you spend your free time?

L: We do a lot of hiking, from the beaches to the mountains, and having a dog who needs a lot of exercise is a great excuse. I do as much volunteer work as I can. We patronize many stores and restaurants and take advantage of all the cultural opportunities, and feel very embedded in the Kentfield community. Our son Abram is 32 now, and he and his wife live in Petaluma. We have a grandson who will be three in January and our granddaughter is about a year and a half old. Thankfully we're very close with them and it's so lovely.

K: Well, you are the loveliest neighbors. You brought me a homemade mac and cheese casserole to welcome me when I moved to Kentfield, and I'm still grateful!

L: We remember! We love this community of Kentfield. This was a place where my heart just knew I belonged. We've been in our home for almost 30 years, and have deep friendships here. I think probably the biggest attraction was the outdoors. The environment, the people, the schools, the community, the natural beauty. No matter where we go, we're always grateful to come back to Marin. We are so blessed to live here.




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