

# Meet Your Neighbors

## Millie and Leo Merle



What multi-faceted local poet, photographer, singer and artist drove a big rig 18 wheeler for 15 years? What hard-working entrepreneur has been traveling far and wide for 30 years to see that independent card stores stock her brand of greeting cards? And who, after 58 years of marriage, get up at 5:30 each day, light candles, sit together and watch the sun gently come up each day? You can find the answers to all of those questions at 18566 White Oak Drive, the home of Millie and Leo Merle.

Their story begins at a party 56 years ago at the home of one of Millie's friends. Leo came with a female buddy, and Millie came with her identically dressed identical twin sister. Leo had to make a choice that most guys don't face—on which twin should he lavish his affections. Having made his choice, Leo and Millie married two years later. Native San

Franciscans, they initially lived in San Francisco, moved to Sonoma in 1977, raised a son and daughter who graduated from Sonoma Valley High School, and have been blessed with three grandsons, now ranging in age from 18 to 30.

Leo started his business career at Well Fargo Bank before he realized that truck drivers make much more money, so he pivoted and drove an 18 wheeler for 15 years; but, since good real estate brokers make even more money and have more control over their time, he has been a real estate broker for 39 years, now with Better Homes Realty/Wine Country Group. Obviously specializing in Diamond A houses, he actually covers the entire wine country and shows no sign of either his age or slowing down, despite time some years ago dealing with colon cancer and his remaining natural (but painful) knee. On average, he sells about 10 houses annually. Leo's line drawings and paintings adorn the walls at 18566 White Oak Drive as do framed magazine covers bearing his photographs. At dinnertime, while Millie rustles up the evening meal, Leo (also an accomplished singer) serenades her on the piano. Leo frequently enriches the lives of his Diamond A neighbors with emailed versions of his nature photographs.

Millie was originally in retail sales, but with two friends started a business 30 years ago as a rep for a greeting card company. While there have been some changes in her partnership over the years, Millie has just kept with the business and today still works about 30 hours a week (when not traveling as far away as Eureka and Reno on business). She tucks work in around her hobbies of walking with the "famous" Diamond A women's walking group (heat and cold don't matter, but they don't walk in the rain), gardening and taking care of Leo. Millie still has an invisible umbilical cord that she has always shared with her twin sister, Sissy, and she has plenty of interesting stories that really can't be explained otherwise than by some paranormal connection between them.

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As usual, I asked them a few questions:

**Why Sonoma/Diamond A?** Despite both having been born and raised in the North side of San Francisco, Diamond A has just always felt like home.

**Favorite Restaurant?** Both: Swiss Hotel—Leo, who doesn't eat red meat, loves the pizza; Millie likes the fried ravioli.

**How about the glass?** Leo: Half full. Millie: At least half empty and going down fast.

**Favorite Events?** Both: Diamond A crab feed. (Leo: 4<sup>th</sup> of July parade)

**Famous People You've Met?** Millie went to her junior prom with Paul Pelosi who went on to marry Nancy Pelosi; they were all friends in the early years. Leo has sold houses to Danny Glover, Robert Redford ("he's really short") and Michael Crichton, author of Jurassic Park.

**Favorite Vacation Spot?** Both: Mendocino/Fort Bragg area and Maui. Leo is hoping to arrange his first trip to Europe for his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday next year; Millie is less enthusiastic about long trips but will probably keep him company to keep him happy. ("Happy Husband, Happy Life?")

**Favorite Season in Sonoma:** Both: spring and fall.

**What's on the Bedside Table?** Both: Scientific American, Smithsonian, National Geographic.

**Pet peeve:** Both: Lane splitting motorcyclists and tourists who are so busy looking at their phones that they walk carelessly.

**Giants/A's?** Both: Giants. They regularly watch them on tv.

**Niners/Raiders?** Niners, for 70 years.

**Favorite exercise:** Leo: pushups (100 a day); Millie: walking with friends.

**Best time of life:** Both: From 45-60.

And here is one of Leo's large format photos, the one he has sold many times, and probably the one he is proudest of:

