

Ellen Moreno: Prominent Morgan Hill educator to be fondly remembered at service Jan. 7

Ellen Moreno was honored nationally as a pioneer in bilingual education

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By Marty Cheek



Photo courtesy Moreno family:

Ellen Moreno receives the Citizen of the Year award in 1995 as her husband John Moreno claps in congratulations.

During her 95 years of a life well lived, Ellen Oberg Moreno saw the transformation of Morgan Hill from a Santa Clara Valley farm town of 1,500 people surrounded by acres of prune orchards to a Silicon Valley city of 40,000 integrated into the region's high-tech industry.

For many years from her home on the west side of Morgan Hill, Moreno enjoyed a view of the prominent El Toro peak, which she last climbed in her 70s. Her daughter Candice "Candy" Cunha checked on her the morning of Nov. 26 and found her breathing slowly and comfortably. Shortly afterwards, she was gone in a gentle passing.

"She left this world like a white dove flying out into the morning," Sylvia, her longtime caregiver, said.

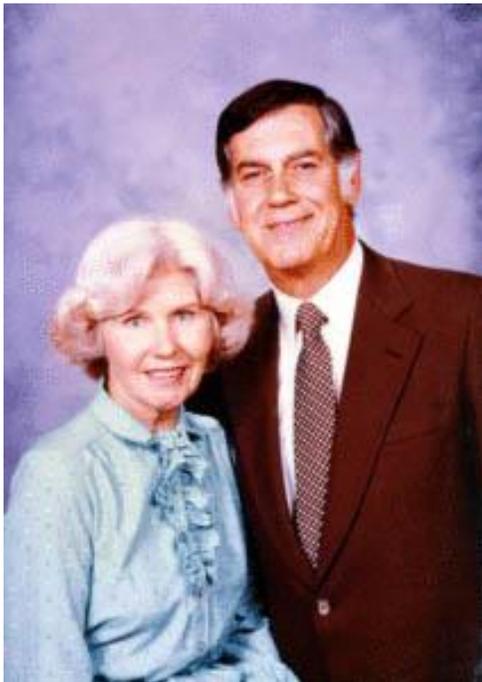
Besides Cunha, Moreno is survived by her sons Glen Moreno and Kim Moreno. Her grandchildren are Katie and Jesse Moreno, Adam, Ashley and Tristan Cunha. She also enjoyed five great grandchildren. A service remembering her life will be held for friends and family at the Morgan Hill Community and Cultural Center 1 p.m. Jan. 7, the 96th anniversary of her birth.

Ellen was born in 1922 to a Swedish immigrant father and a mother who was part of a pioneer farming family in Walnut Creek. As a girl, she grew up working and playing on the Oberg's fruit orchard north of Madrone.

She spent idyllic hours with her brother, Harold Sonny Oberg, on the family ranch exploring nearby creeks and surrounding hills, Kim said. The two attended the nearby Burnett Elementary School.

By the time Ellen graduated from Live Oak Union High School in 1939, her parents had moved to Morgan Hill and started operating the cafe at the Skeels Hotel, what is now the location of downtown's Ladera Grill. Ellen worked waiting on diners while also pursuing her advanced education at Hartnell Community College. At San Jose State University, she earned her undergraduate degree and certification as a teacher and spent 27 years instructing elementary and middle school students in the Morgan Hill Unified School District. Her creative, artistic and musical approach to teaching delighted decades of children, Kim said.

"She taught at least three generations of kids here," he said. "It's amazing how many remember her and would just come up to her when she was walking down the street and say, 'You won't remember me but you were my teacher and I never forgot you.'"



Ellen and John Moreno

Photo courtesy Moreno family

She loved inspiring kids to achieve success in life and was engaged in early experiments in bilingual, and bi-cultural education for Mexican-American farm worker students.

"Those kids are the ones who really, really hang on to her memory, the ones I hear from many years later," Kim said. "They tell me, 'I came to her class and I could hardly speak English. But she made me proud of my heritage. She made me learn and allowed me to believe I was a good student.'"

During the World War II years, the young waitress met at the Skeels Cafe a handsome young man of Spanish heritage who had been born in San Francisco. John Moreno and Ellen fell in love. They married in 1942. John would become a local police officer in 1945 and Morgan Hill's police chief in 1950. In the 1970s during a time of political turmoil on the city council, he would serve as the city manager. A legend of law enforcement and leadership in Morgan Hill, the city's police station is named in his honor.

believe in himself," Kim said. "When he first moved to Morgan Hill (from Santa Clara), he spoke with a Spanish accent, and in those days that didn't win you any friends. And she just instilled a lot of confidence in him."

As a mother and teacher, Ellen imparted the same sense of confidence in her own children and students she taught. She encouraged them to believe in their dreams. She told them if they worked hard and followed their dreams, they can achieve great success in life, Kim recalled.



John and Ellen Moreno with their three children, from left, Glen, and the twins Kim and Candice.

Photo courtesy Moreno family

“It was never said in those terms or anything, but it was just this dream-it-and-do-it idea,” he said. “Probably most of her life was spent dreaming for others and encouraging them to do that. She lived a fairly simple life. She was a mom and a housewife and a school teacher and very active in organizations. She lived her entire life in Morgan Hill.”

Ellen came to be known as “Elena” in her later years in honor of John’s Spanish ancestry. She was not a religious person, but was deeply reverent about everything in her life, a quality which influenced her values as a teacher, community leader, wife and mother, Kim noted.

“She was very loving to us. She was very inspiring to us,” he said. “We were not allowed to be slouches. It was very clear that we were meant for something important. And if we couldn’t figure it out, she would help us figure it out where we’re supposed to be going.”

Besides her students and family, another passion for Ellen was time tending her garden. She was a member of the Morgan Hill Flower Lovers Club, a group her mother, Maybelle, had helped found. She loved creating bouquets that she often gave to friends for their enjoyment. She was an avid world traveler. With John she explored six continents. She was an accomplished pianist and singer. To the delight of her family, she continually filled her home with the refrains of classical, romantic, popular and show tunes music.

Professionally, Ellen is listed in the Who’s Who of American Educators for her pioneer concepts and classroom method in bilingual, bicultural elementary education. Her studies in Mexico led to her Masters Degree in Latin American Studies from SJSU. Ellen was an active member of the local branch of the American Association of University Women and helped start its Wildflower Run fundraiser. She also stayed involved in the Morgan Hill Historical Society and The Fabulous Flappers Dance Team. In 1995, she received the Morgan Hill Chamber of Commerce’s Citizen of the Year Award.

“She visualized herself living all over the world,” Kim said. “But she ended up spending her life in Morgan Hill. The thing that was kind of a blessing for her was she got to enjoy the experience living in this town her whole life — and there are great advantages to that.”



Photo courtesy
Moreno family
Moreno’s 1960
afternoon session
kindergarten class
photo.