

Couple labors to improve the lot of others

By Joan Aragone

CORRESPONDENT

FOR Elbert and Dorothy Mitchell, it's all about community. When the couple moved to the Peninsula from Sacramento in 1959, they located to East Palo Alto and looked forward to raising a family.



During the next 40-plus years, they accomplished that daunting task, with great success. But as

they settled into the then unincorporated area adjacent to upscale Palo Alto, they realized their community had educational and social needs that needed to be addressed. From then on, they made "working for social and economic justice" part of their lives.

In recognition of their efforts, Avenidas, a Palo Alto-based nonprofit agency that serves seniors and their families, will honor the Mitchells with an annual Lifetimes of Achievement Award, given annually to Mid-Peninsula residents over the age of 70 who have contributed in a significant way to their communities.

The Mitchells still live in their original East Palo Alto home. Enlarged over the years to accommodate their three children, the comfortable, two-story structure stands as a testimony to the couple's commitment to their city.

"We love it here," Mitchell, 80, said. "Best climate in the world. Best place to live."

And like their home, which has survived earthquakes, the Mitchells have rolled with the changes that have beset their community. In their early days, Dorothy volunteered in the schools, moved to action when she found that some children couldn't read. Later, Elbert helped establish the College Readiness Program, which tutored young adults with reading problems and helped organize support for bond issues to build community facilities.

In the 1980s the couple were among a group who pushed tirelessly for the controversial incorporation of East Palo Alto as a separate city. In the 1990s as a member of the County Community Development Block Grant Committee, Elbert was instrumental in obtaining funding for Bell Street Park, for a municipal swimming pool and other projects. A longtime school volunteer, Dorothy, now 76, organized parents for community action; she was active in Project Read. She has been a volunteer at Kaiser, Redwood City, for 10 years.

But the Mitchells keep a low profile.

"We didn't accomplish things as individuals," they said in an interview. "We were always involved with many people. We don't want individual praise."

Their sense of justice was formed years ago. Dorothy Seto, born in Sacramento, was a teen-ager in 1942 when she and her family, with three days notice, were whisked off to an internment camp for Japanese-Americans, where they spent the remaining three years of the war.

Elbert, born in 1922 in Co-

lumbus, Ohio, was studying at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, one of the oldest black-only schools in the United States, when he was drafted and sent to the South Pacific with the Army Corps of Engineers. While Dorothy was in the internment camp in Arkansas, Elbert served three years in the South Pacific.

The couple met in 1949 in Sacramento, where Dorothy's family had returned and Elbert had moved to join his brother, an English-speaking pastor of the Japanese Baptist Church there.

They married in 1951, three years after the California Supreme Court declared miscegenation laws — which prohibited marriage between races — unconstitutional. (The U.S. Supreme Court declared such laws unconstitutional in 1967.)

"We were in love, so attitudes didn't stop us," they said.

In 1959 they came to the Peninsula, where Elbert worked as a cartographer with the U.S. Geological Survey in Menlo Park. Although they had rented a home in Redwood City, one week before the planned move there the owner canceled the deal.

"I was devastated," Mitchell said. "And that's what started me in community work." He realized that the only place he could buy a house on the Peninsula as an African-American was East Palo Alto.

In the late 1970s, he worked with the Community Development Institute, a nonprofit organization designed to train community leaders and develop community facilities. Before his retirement from USGS in 1984, he

helped found Expose Minority Persons to Earth Sciences (EMES), a program that involved USGS scientists with high school students through field trips and other projects.

These days Elbert and Dorothy attend tai chi classes at the East Palo Alto Senior Center and do other regular exercises for their health. Their two daughters are both physicians and their son is current president of the CDI.

With their children, five grandchildren and close association with their community, their lives are full.

"They're driven by a deep-seated sense of justice and equity," said Frank J. (Omo-wale) Satterwhite, founder of the CDI. "They have contributed to the community by providing a role model as a family, by giving time and service to the community and by being a friend to lots of people."

But the modest couple see themselves as part of the whole. "Everything we have done is a group effort," they say.

The Mitchells and the other 2003 Lifetimes Honorees — businessman Patrick Goodenough of Atherton; environmentalist Nonette Hanko of Palo Alto; health policy expert Philip Lee, M.D., of Palo Alto; artist Nathan Oliveira of Stanford; and community volunteers Jeanne Ware and Roberta Yee of Palo Alto — will be honored at a reception Sunday, May 18, in a Palo Alto home. For information on the event, call 326-5362, ext. 54.

ALLERGY TALK

Are you sneezing, sniffing, coughing, wheezing, wiping your eyes and wishing you felt better? Come to a

free talk on "Living With Allergies" Tuesday, May 13 from 10 a.m. to noon, San Carlos Senior Center, 601 Chestnut St. Learn about symptoms of allergies, how to manage allergies and the difference between colds and allergies from Maria Serwonska, M.D., allergy specialist, Kaiser Permanente. Call 802-4384.

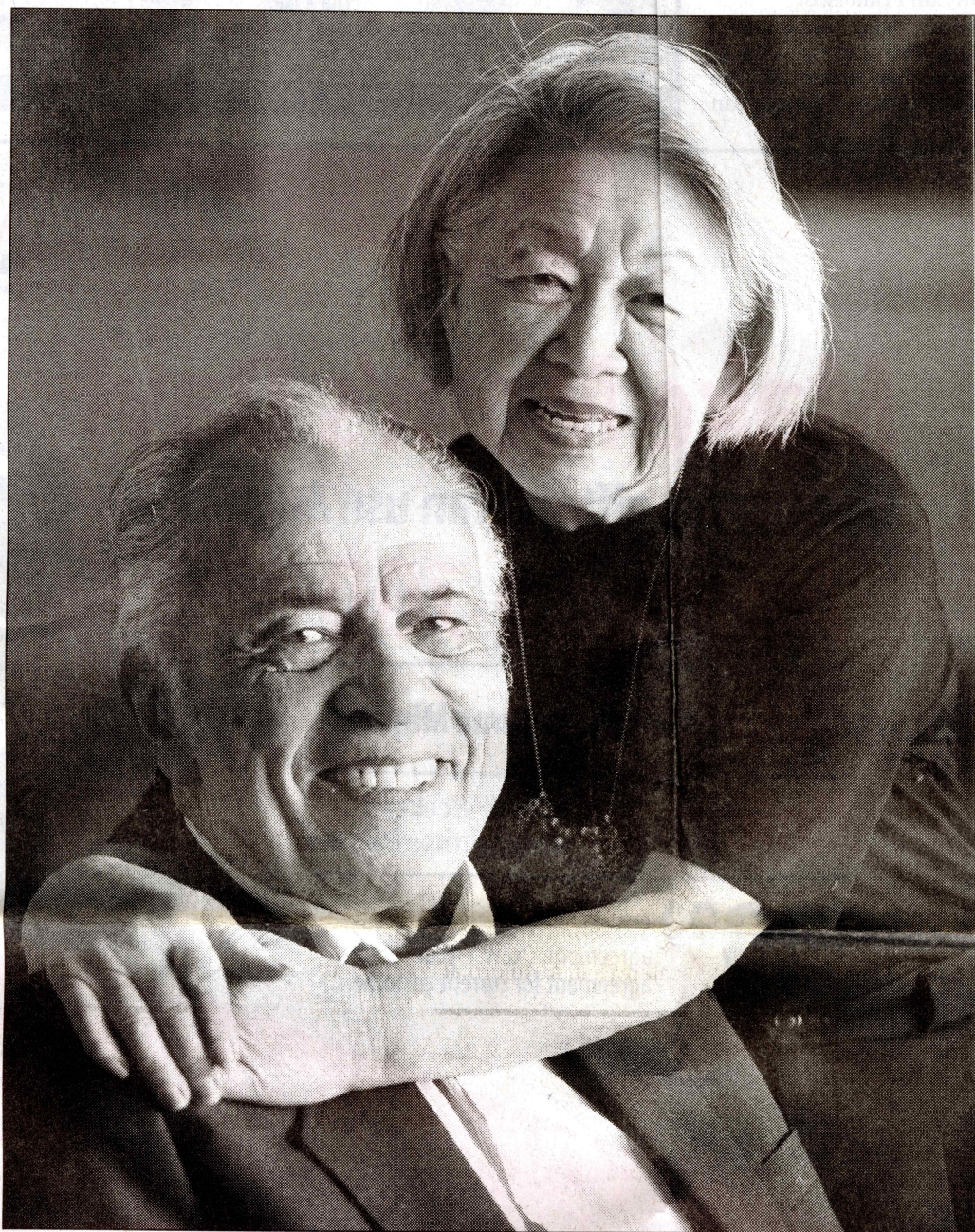
SEN. SPEIER WANTS YOU

State Sen. Jackie Speier, D-San Mateo, invites seniors and their families to share their opinions on issues. Marc Maisano, known to many County seniors for his work with Retired Senior Volunteer Program, is her representative for health care and senior issues. Contact him for help if you have questions or have experienced problems when dealing with state agencies at Sen. Speier's local office, 400 S. El Camino Real, Suite 630, San Mateo, phone: 340-8840.

SINGLES OVER 60

Single men and women over age 60 are invited to a drop-in group at the Veterans Memorial Senior Center, 1455 Madison Ave., Redwood City, starting at 6:30 p.m. Fridays in the Sequoia Room. Come for an evening of fun, friendship and information. There are refreshments, and a potluck dinner is served once a month. For information, call 366-3265.

Senior Journal appears every Friday with news and information about senior life in San Mateo County. Joan Aragone can be reached at 348-4332 or write to Senior Journal, San Mateo County Times, P.O. Box 5400, San Mateo 94402 or fogbelt2@aol.com.



MATHEW SUMNER — Staff

ELBERT AND DOROTHY MITCHELL of East Palo Alto are going to receive Lifetime of Achievement Awards from Avenidas, a nonprofit agency that serves senior citizens, for their involvement in the community in which they live.