

1119 Oak Hill Road, Lafayette, CA

My parents, Eero and Elli, immigrated to the US from Finland in the 1950's. Their journeys intersected in Berkeley, California, where at the time there was a large Finnish community. The Finns of that time primarily worked in the trades as master carpenters and mechanics. My father was no exception as he was a carpenter and a machinist. He had built his first house at the age of 19 with his older brother for their parents, at that time a customary tradition in Finland. My mother was known for her talents as an artist and sign maker for which she had trained for before coming to the US.

Shortly after getting married in 1961 they bought their first house in El Sobrante, but had dreams of building their own home away from the expanding urban environment of the East Bay. They explored and found Lafayette to be ideal as it was far enough away to feel like the countryside, but close enough to access highway 24 to go to work and visit friends in Berkeley. They finally settled upon a hillside knoll off Oak Hill Road, which overlooked Happy Valley to the west and flanked by the Briones ridge to the north. According to my parents, it was the perfect lot with great views, set back from the main road, and conveniently located close to downtown, highway 24 and BART, which was soon to be built.

After a few years of visiting the property, having weekend picnics there with their young children and researching home design and studying architectural drawings, they were getting closer to making these dreams a reality. By 1968, enough money had been saved for materials and Elli's blueprints were approved by the county; they were ready to build. In designing the house, my mother planned it to face east to west, with the morning sun flooding the front yard and kitchen while the evening light spread itself across the living room and backyard. My parents also valued the slope of the property so that they could build the lower portion of the house into the hillside utilizing the natural insulation which allowed for a cooler environment in the summer and easier to keep warm in the winter with the radiant heat.

Two years of using all of their evening and weekends to build, they finished the house and were ready to move in with their two young children, and a newborn, me. Fifty years later and more than ever, I look at the house Eero and Elli built with awe. Our great house was not only my parent's pride and joy, it had become a place to gather for both adults and children. The house being centrally located it naturally became the hub for extended family and friends to gather during holidays and celebrations. Growing up, the long paved driveway and front yard was always considered the best place in the neighborhood to ride bikes and skateboards. One of the things I will miss the most is being in the kitchen and hearing my kids randomly pick up a game with the neighbors' kids on the driveway and having that sense of community and freedom of movement without busy streets to worry about, just as I had in my youth. I hold dear waking up to gazing at the Briones ridge, admiring the incredible beauty of those hills and how their color changes with each season. I value walking to and from the mailbox and feeling like I live in the country. I will never forget all of the times I admired the craftsmanship of the iron my father forged for the stairway railing. I will cherish the memories of basking in the warmth of the Finnish sauna and marveling the beauty of its old growth redwood walls. I treasure the amazing neighbors that are so kind and so helpful. These things and so much more will always be with me.