

Conrad takes pride in preservation

Doctor takes joy from restoring historic buildings

BY LYDIA ROSENBERG

Special to Palm Springs Sun

Tracy Conrad is a woman of diverse talents and numerous accomplishments—a wife, mother, historian, community leader, physician, preservationist, and a documentary filmmaker with one major failing: she shares any recognition.

She grew up in Malibu in a family of doctors and followed the same path. After graduating from UC Berkeley with degrees in art history and geophysics, Conrad attended USC Medical School. She graduated with honors from both universities. It stands to reason she would marry a man who speaks the same language — emergency physician Paul Marat.

The couple are now residents at Smoke Tree Ranch and owners of two of Palm Springs' most notable historic buildings — the Historic Willows Inn and the O'Donnell House. In 1996, they were both Los Angeles emergency room physicians when they were vacationing in Palm Springs and discovered the Willows Inn for sale.

Although it needed renovation, they fell in love with it. They envisioned the home as a charming boutique hotel and successfully created their vision into the only AAA 4-Diamond property in Palm Springs which also has a Class I historic site designation from the city of Palm Springs.

Celebrated history

The Willows, with its Spanish Mediterranean Revival architecture, was built in 1924 by renowned architects Dodd & Richards who designed numer-



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Tracy Conrad and husband Paul Marat own The Willows historic Palm Springs Inn. The inn is the only AAA 4-Diamond property in Palm Springs which also has a Class I historic site designation from the city.

ous notable buildings in Los Angeles. It eventually became the residence of Marion Davies, an actress of the Golden Age and longtime companion of newspaper mogul William Randolph Hearst.

Dating its celebrated history The Willows Historic Palm Springs Inn hosted numerous luminaries such as Clark Gable and Carole Lombard who honeymooned at the Davies home. Other notable guests include Shirley Temple and Albert Einstein.

Conrad and Marat meticulously restored the original interiors featuring decorative wrought-iron works, mahogany beams, beamed ceilings and a dramatic waterfall that cascades down stone granite mountain walls just steps from the inn's dining room.

"I get great joy from this work," Conrad said. "I feel we're only temporary caretakers of our historical treasures and it's important to preserve them so my children's generation and their children will have the benefit of knowing Palm Springs history."

After the Willows restoration

was complete, it began drawing A-list celebrities who enjoy the inn's serenity and privacy.

Conrad and Marat then took on another ambitious project — they purchased the 1921 O'Donnell House, another Class I Palm Springs Historic Site, also known as Ojo Del Desierto, meaning "the eye of the desert."

Perched on the mountain above O'Donnell Golf Course and overlooking Palm Springs, the O'Donnell House offers sweeping views across the Coachella Valley. Designed by architect Charles Thomas, it was built for wealthy oil magnate Thomas O'Donnell by Nellie Collins, owner of the famed Desert Inn, now demolished.

The O'Donnell House was also painstakingly restored by the husband and wife team and is now available for private events. Conrad's restoration and ideas garnered the attention of actress Diane Kruton, also an aficionado of early California architecture.

The O'Donnell House appears in Kruton's 2007 book, "California Romantic Spanish

Colonial and Mission Revival Houses."

These projects are only a tiny snapshot of Conrad's contributions to the preservation of Palm Springs' history. As the chief operating officer for Smoke Tree Ranch, she has been instrumental in restoring its historic charm. Smoke Tree Ranch, a 50-acre parcel of desert, was founded in 1906 as a place where prominent people could enjoy the desert as a casual spontaneous atmosphere. In 2007, Conrad wrote, produced and directed a documentary on Smoke Tree Ranch's history which had its preview at Casahuate Theaters to sold-out audiences.

"Tracy has made huge contributions both to the Palm Springs Historical Society and to our city," said Jan Vagstad, the society's executive director. "Tracy doesn't just talk about historic preservation; she does it — she is responsible for preserving an important part of Palm Springs history."

With two children — Lucas, 9, and daughter Lindsay, 11 — you might imagine that running an inn and managing Smoke Tree Ranch would keep Conrad impossibly busy; for most mortals it would.

But Conrad still practices medicine two days a week at Santa Fe in Palm Desert, a natural bio-identical hormone replacement therapy for men and women.

In addition, she sits on the boards of the Palm Springs Historical Society and Palm Springs Preservation Foundation, and serves on the Palm Springs Planning Commission.

For all of her contributions to the community, Conrad insists on anonymity and no recognition. So



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Lydia Rosenberg is a Palm Springs freelance writer and a public relations consultant.