

Writing from the heart



Earthquake devastation in downtown area draws deep thoughts from Santa Cruz native Geoffrey Dunn, author of 'Santa Cruz is in the Heart.'

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GEOFFREY DUNN climbed the stairs to the Tea Cup restaurant and bar on the Pacific Garden Mall last week, to help an old friend pick up the pieces.

It was the first time Don Yee, the owner and manager of the Tea Cup, had returned to his business since the Oct. 17 earthquake struck. The damage was overwhelming.

"He's put his whole life into that place," said Dunn. "The guy had spent the last 40 years there. To watch him walking up the steps and see everything all over the floor ..."

But Yee didn't flinch. He stepped forward, opened the cash register and began picking up the glass. "It was really powerful."

They cleaned out freezers full of rotting food, filled a dumpster and a half with garbage, then left, Yee planning to open again.

Like many of the characters in Dunn's new book "Santa Cruz is in the Heart," Yee is an old family friend. Dunn's parents had their first date at the Tea Cup. The bar has also been a local haunt for Dunn, a fourth-generation Santa Cruzan who graduated from UC Santa Cruz with a degree in political theory. The restaurant and its owner are the topic of one of the short stories titled, "Room at the Top, Don Yee's Tea Cup."

DUNN HAS lived his entire 34 years in Santa Cruz, except for a few months in Ithaca, N.Y., where he attended graduate school at Cornell University before dropping out to return home. It was back in graduate school at UCSC when Dunn was first encouraged to write about Santa Cruz history. "I realized I wasn't really meant for the academic life," says Dunn, who explores his historical ties to the community in his book, a collection of writings from a six-year period. Tuesday, he will give the November Book talk for the Friends of the Santa Cruz Public Libraries, at noon at the Central Library, 224 Church St.

"I grew up with all these stories," says Dunn, who is now a single father. His daughter is the fifth generation of Italians on his mother's side to live in Santa Cruz. He doesn't talk about his father's history. Dunn has built his writings around the people that make up Santa Cruz history — Italians, Filipinos, Chinese, Indians. He writes about the old Chinatown that once thrived on the banks of the San Lorenzo River where the Galleria now stands, and the Santa Cruz wharf where he spent his childhood with his cousins cleaning boats and catching fish.

Dunn grew up when Santa Cruz was a small town of 15,000, before UC Santa Cruz settled in the hills above the city. He writes about the changes

brought to the city as the population grew and sometimes warns about his concerns for the future.

"In the late '60s, early '70s, I felt the town had really gone through major changes," says Dunn. "Places like Live Oak, Soquel were small communities; 41st Avenue was cow pastures. All of the sudden, it was gone. There were housing tracts and malls."

"A lot of people, especially kids of my generation, feel some resentment."

But Dunn remains optimistic about the future of Santa Cruz, even after the recent devastating quake. "I don't think you have to be born here to love Santa Cruz," says Dunn. "But you need to treat it as your home. Love it as your home, not as a place to exploit or a stepping stone to something else."

With the damage to the Pacific Garden Mall, Dunn notes, many people are saying that Santa Cruz has lost its heart. It's not true, Dunn says. "My feeling is that the heart of Santa Cruz is in its people ... While the buildings are quaint, it's the people that made it special."

DUNN'S GREAT-grandfather on his mother's side jumped ship on the old Cowell railroad wharf which once stood near the Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf. He was 14 years old. "He hooked up with some Spanish fish peddlers and decided to call Santa Cruz his home. This was the first place he ever stepped foot on in America," Dunn writes.

For generations, his ancestors, the Stagnaros of Genoa, fished at the wharf catching mackerel, salmon and bottom fish, unloading boats, mending nets, working the docks.

Dunn worked on and off at the Municipal Wharf until two years ago. He's seen dramatic changes over the years.

"It always sort of had this wonderful waterfront mix, a mosaic, not a melting pot," he says. The wharf was filled with loud, boisterous Italians; the Filipinos came down for the fishheads; the Portuguese fisherman fought with the Italians; the Slavs came from Watsonville.

"The conversation was like a song down there," Dunn says.

The wharf is now mostly a spot for tourists, but Dunn still spends time there. It's still a special spot for him, filled with friends who are descendents of the old fishermen.

He draws a parallel between the wharf and the mall, which he refers to as "a colorful place like the wharf once was."

"If we're not careful we could lose it too," he warns.

A graduate of Soquel High School, Dunn has always worked with his hands — from the wharfs to the brussels sprout fields. He writes that when he was in high school he would rather "be shoveling horse manure than holding a book in his hands."

But since high school, the physical work has been interspersed with intellectual work. He's published political writings, worked on political campaigns, and written documentary films. He describes himself as aligned with the progressive movement in Santa Cruz and has supported Mayor Mardi Wormhoudt's campaign.

He's collaborated on a number of documentaries including a film on Filipino farmworkers, the local Italian fishing community and the history of the Chinese community on the Monterey Bay.

His most recent work includes writing the original screenplay for the feature film "Maddalena Z" which opens Thursday at the Nickelodeon Theater. He's currently working on a new film about Filipinos in California called "Taxi-Dance" and is writing a novel.

Active in the political community, Dunn says he has one hope in the aftermath of the quake.

"I'm tired of the polarization of the community," says Dunn. "If I have one wish it would be that the quake would put an end to the bickering, help break down stereotypes for both sides." He adds, "I think there've been some new bonds made that won't be shattered."

In the last chapter of "Santa Cruz is in the Heart," Dunn explores the possibility of someday leaving Santa Cruz — and its political squabbles — for another community. His 9-year-old daughter, who's playing in the ocean waves near the Santa Cruz wharf, shoots the idea down.

"I realized she has planted roots here," says Dunn. Santa Cruz has already reached into the heart of the fifth generation of his family and grabbed hold.

Friends sponsor Book Talk

Geoffrey Dunn, author of "Santa Cruz is in the Heart" and the film "Maddalena Z" will speak Tuesday at the Friends of the Santa Cruz Public Libraries' monthly Book Talk.

The talk starts at noon in the upstairs meeting room of the Central Branch Library, 224 Church St.

Dunn, a fourth-generation Santa Cruzan, frequently submits his writing on topics of community and historical concern to the Sentinel and other local and regional newspapers and to magazines.

Book talks are free, open to the public.