

### South San Francisco City Hall's disconnect inspires native daughter's Council run

#### MEET THE 'GALVANIZING' KAMALA SILVA



Kamala Silva in her South City home. (Jean Bartlett photo)

BY JEAN BARTLETT | September 20, 2018

"My life is good," Kamala Silva said. "It's simple. I grew up in South City. My husband and I have lived in the same home since 1979. Our children are grown and have families of their own. And it's because my life is simple, when others might be raising families and/or have multiple jobs, that I have decided to run for City Council. I strongly believe serving on the Council is another way of serving our community. I am not looking for a career or a stepping stone to somewhere else. This is a continuation of my service to this community that I truly love. I believe I can make a difference and that difference is needed now. It's all about the City's *General Plan 2040 Update*. This *Plan Update* significantly affects our residents and our visitors. An immediate example of the kinds of things that must be stopped in the new *Plan Update* is represented by the 8 to 15-story proposed development on El Camino Real at the former 6-acre PUC site in Sunshine Gardens. Residents came out in force at the March 28th Joint Council-Successor Agency to protest it."



## BARTLETT'S "NEWS" BRIEFS

Businesses, Events and Profiles | Feature: 'Galvanizing' [Kamala Silva](#) runs for SSF City Council | A2  
[www.bartlettbiographies.com](http://www.bartlettbiographies.com) | story by Jean Bartlett

Like any city, South City's General Plan is about land use, housing, transportation, conservation, noise, safety, open space, environmental justice and implementation strategy for future capital improvement.

"The last General Plan that we did changed the height limits on the northern end of El Camino from 70 feet to 180 feet. Nobody could relate to 180 feet until they start showing you drawings of a 15-story development. It's a single and two-story neighborhood, maybe one three-story apartment complex, but 15 stories? That's what happened on the last General Plan. They changed some residential areas from R1, meaning one home per lot, to RL, which is low density. Nobody knew what that meant. That means I could change my home into a duplex. I could put a house in the backyard. We have houses here that are 600 square feet and there is a 400 square foot house in their backyard. Whatever open space they have is a carport. It is creating shantytowns. The *General Plan 2040 Update* is coming up and I want to be a directing, guiding force. Right now the City of San Mateo is asking the residents to vote on how high they want buildings to go. How much density do they want? We didn't do that. We had it in the meeting agendas, and most people don't read that, or you can't comprehend it and now we have 15-story potential going in, though our Council is saying less."

Silva noted there is another project, already in process, that absolutely defines the disconnect between the City and its residents. A photo of the Rotary Miller Avenue Senior Housing project, a 7-story, 81-unit project on the 300 block of Miller Avenue, clearly overwhelming its residential neighbors, was posted on Silva's Everything South City's Facebook page. (*Everything South City*, [www.EverythingSouthCity.com](http://www.EverythingSouthCity.com), is an online news source. Its purpose is to "satisfy a hunger from the community for real time information" for those who live and work in South San Francisco. It was created by Silva nine years ago.) The referenced photo was taken by South San Francisco Historical Society member Julie Chimenti.



Julie Chimenti photo

**Senior housing project looms over Old South City home.**

Along with her photo, Chimenti shared her opinion of the Senior Housing project. "While I appreciate and understand the need for more housing (it's happening up and down the Peninsula), I am saddened and disappointed that our city seems to have little respect for our history or its citizens. The towering, characterless boxes do nothing to enhance our town. I've seen Colma preserve a historical building in its latest development. I've seen San Bruno and San Mateo build enormous complexes with at least some thought to design. And how is THIS ok or respectful or considerate?"

## BARTLETT'S "NEWS" BRIEFS

Businesses, Events and Profiles | Feature: 'Galvanizing' [Kamala Silva](#) runs for SSF City Council | A3  
[www.bartlettbiographies.com](http://www.bartlettbiographies.com) | story by Jean Bartlett

"God bless our seniors," Silva said. "And we need housing for our seniors. But seven stories, 81 units with 39 parking places right up against Mrs. Miramontes' home? She is a senior, our senior, and she and her husband helped create our city. He built the Morales Hall on Miller, which I understand now has developers salivating. How does this kind of construction help our residents and our seniors? The people in the neighborhood complained. But our planning commission approves everything. Our neighbors are taking the hit down there big time with the traffic and the construction. On top of that, this senior housing facility is open to anybody. Our neighbors are having housing problems and we are going to bring in others from different areas?"

"People are angry," she continued. "Here in South City and all over the Bay Area. Our history is important and it's being wiped out. This picture that Julie took says a thousand words."

Silva ran previously for South San Francisco City Council.

"I ran previously because I thought then, as I do now, that there is a big disconnect between City Hall and South City residents. My purpose in running originally was to open up City Hall to help people get the information and resources they needed. While I didn't win the bid to get into City Hall back then, I realized I could do a lot to share information on what is going on, on both sides of the dais. That is why I created Everything South City and after nine years of community outreach through ESC, I am ready to run again for City Council."

With more than 16,000 Facebook followers, clearly ESC is the go-to source not only for local news, but also for local views.

"As our city continues to grow we are losing the small town feeling that once made everyone feel connected, no matter in which neighborhood they lived," ESC's founder and editor stated. "In bygone days, the Enterprise Journal was our local independent news and we took great pride in being showcased by our own, to our own, and beyond."

Born Cynthia Kamala Wolfe at Kaiser in San Francisco, Kamala was raised on Avalon Drive. She is the daughter of Betty and Mel Wolfe, and one of six kids.



courtesy photo

**The Wolfe siblings. Kamala is top row, second from left.**

"My parents, both San Francisco natives, bought their home on Avalon when it was a brand new neighborhood. They moved in in May and I was born in October. We lost my mom in 2012, but my dad at 94 is still going strong and lives independently in the family home."

Silva also lost one of her siblings, her brother Tim. In February of 1980, Tim, 21, and his buddies, all from South City – Joe Gavidia, Steve Hurst, Steve Anderson, Mike Carter and Bruce McDonald – were heading home from a snow skiing trip. Their plane crashed and all six men died. Roberta Teglia was South City's mayor at the time and she dedicated Avalon

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Businesses, Events and Profiles | Feature: 'Galvanizing' [Kamala Silva](#) runs for SSF City Council | A4  
[www.bartlettbiographies.com](http://www.bartlettbiographies.com) | story by Jean Bartlett

Memorial Park to the kids. The park's memorial bench lists these young sons of South San Francisco and includes a poem by Kamala.

Silva's parents moved to South City from San Francisco in the 1950s, because it was a good neighborhood and it had good schools. They were founding parishioners of St. Veronica's. Her dad worked for U.S. Steel American Bridge and was one of the last to go when the steel mills closed their doors. Kamala went to Avalon Elementary, Southwood Junior High and South City High School.

A few years older than his wife, Kamala's husband Dave Silva is also a South City native and graduate of South City High. "He was raised in Old Town."

"After he graduated from South City High School, Dave headed off to study music and we didn't meet until after I headed off to study criminal justice at San Francisco State." (She eventually changed her field of study to liberal arts.) "We met 42 years ago at a club where his band was playing. We married that same year."

Always a musician, Dave nevertheless had a 25-year career with California Water Service as a production superintendent.

"Now that Dave's retired, he definitely has more time to devote to playing."

The couple has three children and five grandchildren. Their daughter is a marketing director and lives in South San Francisco, and both sons are firemen, one in San Francisco and the other in San Diego. All three kids are El Camino High School graduates.

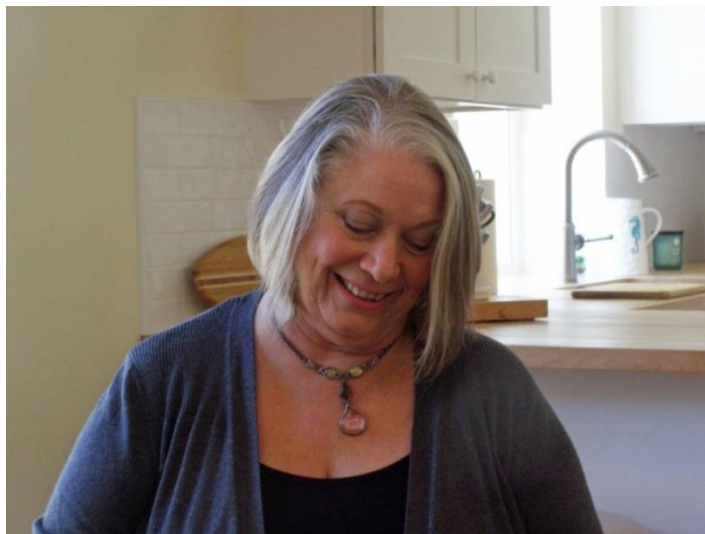
"We are coming up on our 57th edition of our City's classic Bell Game between South San Francisco and El Camino high schools," Silva said. "With Dave and I being South City graduates and our kids being El Camino graduates, those games are a lot of fun for our family."

Silva worked in medical administration until her children were born, then went back into the field when her kids headed off to college. She still works with hospice patients.

"Dave and I bought our home in South City's Paradise Valley neighborhood in 1979."

Paradise Valley neighborhood dates back to 1924. Dave and Kamala's home is two blocks from Old Town South City.

"When we moved here it was very quiet. The 4-H Club was where the fire station is now. It was before Sister Cities Blvd. went in. We used to hike up San Bruno Mountain and have lunch there. When my sons got to be 10 or 11, they would take their fishing poles over to Oyster Point and those were things that made South San Francisco a small town."



Jean Bartlett photo

**The candidate reminisces over what made South City a small town.**

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Businesses, Events and Profiles | Feature: 'Galvanizing' [Kamala Silva](#) runs for SSF City Council | A5  
[www.bartlettbiographies.com](http://www.bartlettbiographies.com) | story by Jean Bartlett

A board member of San Bruno Mountain Watch (<http://www.mountainwatch.org>) – grassroots volunteers whose mission is to preserve and expand the native ecosystems of San Bruno Mountain in perpetuity – the City Council candidate notes that environmental issues have always been a big deal for her.

"I grew up on the Bay. I learned how to water ski out on San Francisco Bay when I was 5 years old. That's been my playground. I am a certified sailor and up until a few years ago, I had a sailboat out there. In my youth, I rode dirt bikes where Genentech is today. In fact, I rode dirt bikes before Westborough and 280 were there and it was just Junipero Serra Blvd."

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Her environmental concerns also led to her appointment to the Colma Creek Citizens Advisory Committee by the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors. According to the Sequoia Audubon Society – San Mateo County Birding Guide: "Colma Creek, which has its headwaters on San Bruno Mountain, flows west toward Daly City, then is buried underground to reemerge in a concrete channel in South San Francisco. The creek returns to a natural bed as it crosses under San Mateo Avenue. Fed by every storm drain along the way, it reaches the bay behind the SFO Airport Costco."

And always, Silva has been about community.

"From our earliest days living in Paradise Valley, our home has been a gathering place for our neighbors and we've always had at least one cause as our focus, anything from coaching sports, to volunteering in our schools, to discussing local concerns that need to be brought to City Hall."

One Paradise Valley neighbor who everyone got to know was South City retired mailman Bill Cottenham. He loved to chat and keep a watchful eye on all the neighborhood doings. Everybody loved him. When he died, Silva pulled neighbors together to work with SSF's Parks and Recreation Department to have a memorial bench in honor of Bill installed at the corner of Hillside and Sister Cities Blvd. The neighbors bought the bench.

"To me, this genuine caring spirit of the people is what makes South City such a great town. But the City does not often listen."

Years ago, Silva decided to educate herself on what goes on within the different departments of South San Francisco by taking City Hall's Citizen's Academy.

"It's an 11-week free course and one night a week is devoted to a different department. For instance, one night is devoted to public works. You meet with the directors of public works and learn about streets, signs, storm drains and those types of things. You learn about the police and fire departments, the water treatment plant, and through park and recreation you learn about all the facilities, classes offered, playgrounds and trees throughout the city. I took the course a second time in 2015 because in 2013 and 14, we had a major exodus from City Hall, mostly due to retirement, and all the players changed dramatically.

"We lost our Fire Chief, our Police Chief and other department heads including Barry Nagel. Barry lives in South San Francisco and he worked for many years in different capacities for the City, eventually retiring as our City Manager. When these people left, all their people left as well. So we had a whole new group of people that came in, and many of them are new to South City, and the energy changed at City Hall.

"Now this is not to say these people are solely responsible for the things that are making longtime residents so unhappy, but they need to welcome and learn from longtime residents. I don't see that happening.

"We've definitely had some revolving doors at City Hall. Some people come in from other cities. They do their five years, get fully vested and leave."

An immediate example that comes to mind is a reforestation project that was recently completed in the Paradise Valley neighborhood. Back in 2008 and 2009, Silva galvanized more than 20 of her neighbors to bring their community's very real problem to the City's attention. The newly built Sister Cities Blvd., with its 45 miles per hour traffic zone coming from the

airport and the freeway, had created noise and smog pollution in Paradise Valley. City planners did a \$35,000 taxpayer funded study to see what could mitigate the noise and air pollution affects and the answer was trees. The City Hall crew changed and nothing happened. Paradise Valley neighbors went back to City Hall. Ten years later, thanks to Park & Rec Manager Greg Mediati, they've got two blocks of reforestation on Hillside Blvd.

"The thing with the trees is just an example of how the City will take in developers and say, yes, and then sell it to residents as this and this and this," Silva said. "Our trees were supposed to have been put in there, originally, as part of the Myers Development project."

Silva has a long list of examples. She discusses the Towers at the base of San Bruno Mountain.

"They are nice looking buildings but we've never had high rises on this side of town so they are kind of a shock for everyone. We were told these office/science buildings would also offer South City residents amenities like an amphitheater. But we have learned there are no venues that will be offered to residents. The buildings are solely for companies and their clients."

She discussed an 18-story condominium tower on the side of San Bruno Mountain.

"What is really bothering so many people here in South City with this huge amount of growth that we have been experiencing, is so much of it has been on the drawing board but now it's on steroids and there is no respect. There is no regard for people that have been here before and people are angry. I am angry. Things that were supposed to be done to help mitigate the harsh effects of the new developments are not being done. I have spent 10 years of my life going back and forth, and I get so far with somebody and they retire because they have been here for five years. Then I have to start all over again with the next person. It is exhausting and ridiculous."

Recently The Daily Journal ran the headline "South San Francisco officials weighing development woes," subtitled: "Councilmembers recognize community fatigue amidst rare economic opportunity." The June 29, 2018 article by Austin Walsh begins: "South San Francisco officials attempted to reconcile their desire to seize a rare economic opportunity against the toll ongoing development is taking on the quality of life for their residents."

Silva couldn't agree more and she begins to pound her fist on the table with compassion for her town and her community.

"South City has 66,000 people living here and we have another almost 30,000 that come to work every day. This has created a huge problem – an imbalance of commercial and residential. I believe this has happened due to bad decisions made by our City leaders. Past administrations were more careful to weigh our Eastside biotech sibling, not wanting to put all our eggs in one basket.

"We can't house the people who work here now. A police officer, a teacher, they need to live here. That is an issue. When I see all these other jobs coming in and people coming in and wanting housing, I say, what about us? We need to take care of us first and we are not doing that.

"I think it is unethical to keep building jobs for people you cannot house. That is wrong. We do not have the infrastructure to take care of that and some of our older infrastructure needs updating, examination and care.

"For instance, Oyster Point, it's a two-lane, land-filled road with more than 22,000 people going out there daily. Now the North Canal Bridge, the most convenient route in and out, is shut down. It turns out the bridge is like a toothpick, rotted out completely. How did this happen? Bridges are supposed to be examined once a year. Then there was the problem with the City's outreach in sharing the news the bridge was out. On top of any information online, I believe the City should have sent out flagmen, during commute times, to inform the public of the upcoming closure. At ESC, I received and ran a photo of one of our fire trucks stuck in traffic. This is poor City planning.

"Let's talk about the Oyster Point Marina Ferry Terminal. I was not in favor of where they built it. I think it should have been built further up towards Sister Cities where you already have a cove. There it would be accessible for Brisbane – because the Bay Lands is coming and they have 900 acres they will be building there. The Ferry would be accessible from that point, instead of from a two-lane, land-filled road. The reason they put the ferry in is because after 9/11, emergency responders saw how important a ferry was in rescue and recovery. That was the idea here.

## BARTLETT'S "NEWS" BRIEFS

Businesses, Events and Profiles | Feature: 'Galvanizing' [Kamala Silva](#) runs for SSF City Council | A7  
[www.bartlettbiographies.com](http://www.bartlettbiographies.com) | story by Jean Bartlett

"Okay. So, the ferry is all done, and people are using it daily. Then one day there is a little burn fire in one office in the biotech cluster out at Oyster Point. It was contained. But they shut down the ferry at 4 o'clock that day as a result. All those people dependent on the ferry had to find another means to get home. If one little fire, in one little isolated room, shuts down the ferry, what's going to happen, if God forbid, there is a massive catastrophe out there? It's all biotech. Everything that could be used in warfare is out there on unstable land. I like to think this is something the City has planned for but the residents need to know about it.

"The thing about South City is we change, we roll. We've gone from dairy farms, to meat packing plants, to steel manufacturing. We constantly move. We are industrious. People look at Sign Hill and say, why does it say 'Industrial?' To me that means, and I've been saying this for decades, you pull up your sleeves and get the job done. That's what we do, whether it was dairy farming, meat packing or steel mills. Now it's DNA. Every industry has left its footprints. What will future generations find after the biotechs leave? We are not looking at that and we need to."

For those unfamiliar with Sign Hill, it is a monument to South San Francisco's history written on the south side of a 581-foot hill that is part of San Bruno Mountain. Constructed in 1923 with whitewash and upgraded five years later to its current 60-foot-high letters made out of concrete four inches thick, the sign proudly reads: "South San Francisco The Industrial City." In 1996, South City resident Edna Spangler Harks persuaded the United States Department of the Interior to recognize the sign in the National Register of Historic Places. On the top of Sign Hill, "a tall pole with electric lights serves as an electric Christmas tree, which is typically lit from the day after Thanksgiving until January 6."

Additionally the co-founder of Friends of Sign Hill (FSH), for years Silva, FSH and San Bruno Mountain Watch, lobbied side-by-side to preserve a 21-acre parcel on Sign Hill. That effort, working in partnership with the City of South San Francisco, the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors, and an extraordinary gifting of land from Cheryl and Ross Liberty, resulted in the preservation of the acreage. In October, Liberty Park will be dedicated. FSH and San Bruno Mountain Watch are additionally continuing lobbying efforts to preserve "the remaining 20 acres on the western parcel currently owned by Syme Estate."

"There is so much the residents of South San Francisco can get done and want to do," Silva said. "When one of our community members, little Juliana Peña, was battling childhood cancer, Everything South City and South City Elks brought our community together to fundraise for Juliana and her family. When Juliana lost her battle, we galvanized. We saw to it that our Sign Hill tree was lit in gold throughout the month of September in Juliana's memory, and in support of Childhood Cancer Awareness Month. Juliana used to love seeing the lights on the tree from her bedroom window."

"Through her website and very interactive Facebook page," one supporter writes, "Kamala pulled 500 people together within three days to have a candlelight vigil in support of Officer Robby Chon, following his brutal beating on Thanksgiving 2016."



Elaine Lee photo

"He was severely wounded and residents were at a loss," Silva said. "This happened to one of our own. It was beyond comprehension. So many people contacted Everything South City. They needed, we all needed, a time and place to come together to build each other up, to regain a sense of balance. And we needed Officer Chon and his family to know how deeply we all cared."

*(At left: Kamala is pictured taking pictures on National Night Out 2018. "Never one to grandstand, Kamala is the quiet force behind many South San Francisco community events - and the camera," noted SSF resident Elaine Lee.)*

The "quiet force" that is Kamala is easily corroborated in her home neighborhood where she got neighbors to join in and create the Paradise Valley Neighborhood Network. This year they are having their third block party for the whole

## BARTLETT'S "NEWS" BRIEFS

Businesses, Events and Profiles | Feature: 'Galvanizing' [Kamala Silva](#) runs for SSF City Council | A8  
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neighborhood. It's in October and they block off the streets. They have a band, and the police and fire department participate. They have vendors like LimeBike. LimeBike is a transportation rental company that has brought "green" bikes to South City. People use an app to locate a bike, unlock it, ride it to where they need to go and then leave it for the next person. It's \$1 for 30 minutes.

"As a Councilmember, I want to help establish a template for all neighborhoods to create a Neighborhood Network. It's like an HOA, but without the expense of being a 501 nonprofit. It's a way to help neighborhoods get to know each other and have their own voice."

The candidate is also a hands-on supporter of National Night Out. National Night Out is a community-police-and-fire awareness-raising event.

"I am very much pro police officer," Silva said. "I may not always agree with the way things are handled, but I believe in our police officers and I believe in our firefighters."

"I've lobbied every neighborhood in our City to host a National Night Out event," she continued. "We are only as strong as our weakest link and we need to become more unified. But it is getting harder with all the building going on and all the additional people that are coming in because of that building. We need to take a breath and assimilate before we add more to our mix."

Someone asked Silva when she was going to take off the gloves and start fighting.

"I don't fight," she laughed. "I am collaborative. I want to find the middle road. You tell me, you hate this, you hate this. Okay, what do we like and let's work from there."

"Compassion is a must. Money is important and we have to have that but not at the complete loss of what connects us. One of the things we have problems with here is housing. You get in that Yimby/Nimby fight. Yes In My Backyard and Not In My Backyard. A lot of the Yimbys are the people who have moved here more recently. People might say, 'If you own your home, you can move. You have equity. You bought your home a long time ago.' I work with people in hospice care. I have never heard one of these people say they wish they had more money. It is the connections that we make through our whole life. It is our community. It's our neighbors. It is the mailman. It is those connections that you make, that bring you your sense of who you are. It's the roots. It's the history."

Two big fans of Silva are Brisbane Councilmember Cliff Lentz and longtime San Bruno City Councilmember Ken Ibarra, who retired at the end of 2017 after more than two decades of public service. Both grew up in South San Francisco.

"Kamala's direct, no nonsense approach to City issues makes her well suited to take on the challenges facing South San Francisco," Lentz said. "She would be a thoughtful and proactive public servant."

"Ever been asked a question that you can't answer but know exactly who can answer or find the answer?" Ibarra said. "That's Kamala. She may literally know everything about South City."

"Residents have asked me to be their voice," the candidate said. "I tell them they need to come to City Council meetings. I can't do it on my own. I am amplifying our voices. This is for **ALL** of us. Don't expect me to carry the load and be by myself. When I tell you to be there at Council, you better be there. For the last 9 years, nearly 10, that I have run Everything South City, I have been listening and I hear you. I get it. I am one of you. We will have a place at the table, you and me."

"South City is not going to be the way it used to be. Progress is part of life. Life continues on and you keep in step. You keep moving but we need to direct how we move. Is everyone's voice part of that movement or is a tumbleweed leading the way?"

"South City is not going to be the way it used to be. Progress is part of life. Life continues on and you keep in step. You keep moving but we need to direct how we move. Is everyone's voice part of that movement or is a tumbleweed leading the way?"

There are three open spots on the South San Francisco City Council. Challenging South San Francisco incumbents Mark Addiego and Pradeep Gupta are Mark Nagales, Flor Nicolas, Steven Ponce-Ramirez and Kamala Silva.



## BARTLETT'S "NEWS" BRIEFS

Businesses, Events and Profiles | Feature: 'Galvanizing' [Kamala Silva](#) runs for SSF City Council | A9  
[www.bartlettbiographies.com](http://www.bartlettbiographies.com) | story by Jean Bartlett

Silva said if she wins a seat on Council, she wants to address the City Flag with the residents of South San Francisco.

"Our City Flag is an emblem of a DNA which says a lot right there. Yet, as proud as we are that South San Francisco has the worldwide distinction of being the birthplace as well as the largest cluster of biotech, our City flag needs to address what our residents are feeling and saying: 'This is OUR City and we want it back!'"

You can learn more about Silva at [KamalaSilva.me](http://KamalaSilva.me).



courtesy photo

**Kamala and her husband Dave celebrate their 39th anniversary in 2016.**



### A Bartlett's Biographies Headliner

[Jean Bartlett](#) is a longtime Bay Area features writer: Pacifica Tribune, Oakland Tribune, San Jose Mercury, San Mateo Times, Portraits & Roots, Marin Independent Journal, Twin City Times, Ross Valley Reporter, Peninsula Progress, Coastal Connections, Contra Costa County Times, Bay Area Business Woman and Catholic San Francisco. Contact her through her website, [www.bartlettbiographies.com](http://www.bartlettbiographies.com).