

Society honoree has colorful past

May 30, 1996

Sunday school teacher, musician, real estate agent, spy

By Cheryl Walker
The News

Leisure World's Historical Society had many reasons for selecting 15-year resident Marion Miller Neuburger as its June Leisure Worlder of the Month.

The perky, PCM/Laguna Hills Resales agent, Saddleback Hospital volunteer and active member of the Jewish Federation of Orange County has generously donated her time and organizational, secretarial and people skills to a variety of community organizations, notably Opera 100, Saddleback Kiwanis and Republican Clubs.

"She does an excellent job," says Ward Payne, former Saddleback Kiwanis president.

"She's a terrific lady, dedicated, thorough, generous and kind, a dream to work with," says Tom Beckwith, Republican Club president and fellow Kiwanian. "Her heart's in the right place."

The native New Yorker and avid gardener says she's only doing what she likes to do: serve her community and country.

And those who know her background know how deeply she means what she says.

From 1950-1955, Neuburger was a spy for the Federal Bureau of Investigation working undercover using the alias "Susan Wilcox" to gather information about subversive communist groups in the United States.

How did a young wife, mother and music teacher then living in West Los Angeles get into such a dangerous job?

It started with an invitation to attend the organizational conference for a group calling itself the "Los Angeles Committee for the Protection of Foreign Born."

Neuburger's then husband Paul Miller, who had done counterintelligence work for the US government during World War II, suspected after reading the invitation that the group might be a communist front and told his wife to send the missive to the FBI.



Myra Neben/The News

Marion Miller Neuburger takes time out from a busy schedule to water her plants. The ceremony for the June honoree will be at Clubhouse 6 on June 5.

The following week an agent came to her home and said the FBI shared her husband's concerns and asked if she'd be willing to attend the conference and report.

"I'm not that brave a person," says Neuburger. But, she agreed thinking it was the least she could do when American boys were going overseas to fight the communists in Korea.

She was, however, nervous and, taking a tip from the agent, took along knitting to keep her calm.

The meeting was held in an upstairs room in a building in what she calls a "seamy part" of Los Angeles across from MacArthur Park.

Neuburger says she found a "motley group" of about 75 people lapping up the rhetoric of speakers denouncing alleged US atrocities on the Korean battlefields and praising the political agendas of the Soviet Union and China. One of the speakers even admitted he represented the Communist Party.

Neuburger got enough material to write a detailed three-page, single-spaced report which so impressed the FBI that they asked her to continue as an undercover agent.

The FBI also urged her to take up the offer of an educated, attractive woman who'd sat next to her at the meeting,

and do clerical work.

For Neuburger it meant attending night meetings and keeping her activities secret from her mother and friends. "At the outset, the hardest part for me was being deceptive."

Within two months, she was on the executive committee of the group and shortly after that a Communist party member. The group insisted her husband join also.

After that, says Neuburger, party activities, including classes in Marxism, fund drives, picketing and propagandizing, took over their lives-and their home, which the "comrades," who never revealed their last names, didn't hesitate to use any hour of the day or night.

Although the stress of her undercover work gave her ulcers, fear that she was losing time with her children and that they might have to join young Communist groups finally took their toll.

Neuburger held out as long as she could but finally doctors insisted she take time off.

Luckily, while convalescing, the Department of Justice said they had sufficient evidence to prove the group was a Communist front.

For five days starting Oct. 3, 1955 Neuburger was the Department's expert witness before the Subversive Activities Control Board in Washington.

Although Neuburger concluded her testimony hoping to return to a normal life, the Communists retaliated with a campaign of dirty tricks, starting with an "Open Letter" to her neighbors alleging her spying activities included them that made her life a living hell.

Recriminating phone calls, letters, even broken windows and gunshots besieged Neuburger until her husband gave her real story to the press and the tide of public opinion changed dramatically.

The number of honors, medals and awards from J. Edgar Hoover, Presidents Eisenhower and Nixon and scores of elected officials, city and state governments, and others earned her the title of

“the most decorated lady in nation.”

Her story was also featured on television by Ralph Edwards in an installment of “This Is Your Life” and in the General Electric Theater drama “My Dark Days” (with Ronald Reagan and Jeannie Crain playing the Millers) and in book form under the title “I Was a Spy.”

Neuberger says she further was invited to give lectures, talks and interviews on her experiences and answers thousands of questions, like why would an American become a Communist in the first place.

Communism poses as “a party of good will,” she says.

“My experience made me much more aware I have to sift fact from fiction - this is what I try to tell people: don’t be gullible, ask yourself what are other people’s goals?”

Neuberger, who went on to a successful career in business and real estate, says her experiences influenced her continued involvement in civic affairs, particularly campaigning to get good candidates into political offices.

She adds that she doesn’t live in the past, still she hopes retelling her story once again will inspire people “to serve their community.”

Neuberger says she’d have reservations about renewing



Actor Ronald Reagan, left and actress Jeannie Crain, right, played the parts of “spies” Marion and Paul Miller” in a General Electric Theatre presentation.

her undercover career but doesn’t rule it out either “there’s always evil to fight against.”

Ceremony facts

Who: Marion Miller
Neuberger

What: June Leisure Worlder

Where: Clubhouse 6

When: 10 a.m., Wednesday,
June 5

Sponsor: Leisure World His-
torical Society