

Mill Valley Oral History Program
Lucretia Little History Room
Oral History Program

Sally Kuhlman and Celia Graterol

An Oral History Interview
Conducted by Benja Thompson in 2023

TITLE: Oral History of Sally Kuhlman and Celia Graterol
INTERVIEWER: Benja Thompson
DESCRIPTION: Transcript, 10 pages
INTERVIEW DATE: May 24, 2023

In this oral history, longtime Mill Valley residents Sally Kuhlman and Celia Graterol discuss their upbringings and what initially drew them to Marin. They share their experiences raising children as a same-sex couple in Mill Valley and reflect on the experience of getting married three days before Proposition 8 passed in 2008. Over the course of this interview Graterol and Kuhlman talk about celebrating marriage equality progress in 2013, as well as the new movement for trans and non-binary individuals. They also reflect on Mill Valley's LGBTQ+ community and how it has changed over the decades.

Additionally, Graterol discusses her love for mountain biking and hiking at the Golden Gate National Recreation Area and Kuhlman shares about her career in blogging and making a name for herself in the local media. Throughout the interview Graterol and Kuhlman discuss the importance of establishing a community in Mill Valley and finding ways to socialize through COVID-19. They also discuss their shared commitment to nonprofit, socially-minded work. This conversation is a wonderful look into a same-sex couple's experience and perspective raising children in Marin, and an assessment of the progress our country has seen over a generation.

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Oral History of Sally Kuhlman and Celia Graterol

May 24, 2023

00:00:01 Benja Thompson: Today is May 24th, 2023. My name is Benja Thompson, and this interview is for the Mill Valley Public Library's oral history program. Today I am speaking with Sally Kuhlman and Celia Graterol at the Mill Valley Library. Thank you for joining me and for contributing your oral history to our community. Let's talk a little bit about your history. Can you share a bit about your family and where you grew up?

00:00:32 Sally Kuhlman: Sure. I'll go first. I'm Sally. I grew up in Southern California, in Orange County, and I grew up in a conservative Christian family. I went to a Lutheran school, K-8th grade. And I'll just leave it at that. So, yeah.

00:00:50 Celia Graterol: I grew up in Caracas, Venezuela, in South America. And I actually was in Caracas in a neighborhood called Los Guayabitos which means 'small guava,' and is in the outskirts of the city. So my house was in the mountains. I remember my parents' house was in the border with open space, a national park, and that's where I grew up.

00:01:19 Benja Thompson: And then what brought you both to Mill Valley?

00:01:23 Celia Graterol: For me it was safety. At the time, I had one kid already, and I wanted to be living in a place where it was safe. And I had a relative that was in Marin County, and that's why I decided to just move and experience what it is to live in a first world country. And I landed in Marin County which is an amazing place to live.

00:01:54 Sally Kuhlman: I fell in love with San Francisco the first time I saw it when I was a young teenager. My mom and I took a trip up here and I just loved all the unique people and the open mindedness that I was seeing. And so when I was in college, I decided I wanted to move up to San Francisco, and I actually had some friends in college in Marin County. And so that's how I ended up in Marin County and actually how I met Celia. And that was in 1993.

00:02:29 Celia Graterol: Wow. That was a long time ago.

00:02:35 Benja Thompson: Oh, I suppose I can jump in with how have you seen Mill Valley change in the time that you've been here?

00:02:42 Celia Graterol: There's a lot more traffic. A lot more houses. And something in particular that has happened at least around the neighborhood where we live, it used to be smaller houses and more homey houses –

00:03:01 Sally Kuhlman: More working class.

00:03:02 Celia Graterol: Yeah. And any have changed, you know, every time. Just newer couples, younger couple with little kids, and every time a house sold it gets rebuilt much bigger, much more luxurious and is changing the nature of what Mill Valley was. I've seen that. Yeah.

00:03:25 Sally Kuhlman: More wealth. And it's getting younger, the population. We're watching as all our neighbors either move out or pass away. The houses are being sold to young couples in their thirties that are, like she said, tearing them down and building large houses.

00:03:41 Celia Graterol: Yeah, and very white.

00:03:43 Sally Kuhlman: Hmm. Still. That hasn't changed. Yeah.

00:03:47 Benja Thompson: Hmm. Well, you are both very involved with the local community. Sally, you've been involved with the Spectrum LGBT Center, Trips for Kids, Beyond Differences, and your own blog, *Sally Around the Bay*. Celia, you're the founder of Mountain Biking Marin and work for the Metro Academy program at SFSU. What draws you both to working with your communities?

00:04:14 Celia Graterol: Well, for me, the open space in Marin, it reminds me how I grew up, and I grew up opening trails. When I was really young my grandfather gave me a double-edged machete to open trails, something that you usually don't give to a little kid. So living out here, I consider the GGNRA my extended backyard. I just want to share that amazing wealth that we have in a county that is so green and so not developed to people.

So that's one of my passions. And currently I'm working in a Metro Student Success Program at the San Francisco State University. And what we do is we help support, provide math tutors, faculty, special courses for kids that are coming from underserved low-income populations in the Bay Area. They are first gen, the first ones in their families to go to college.

A lot of immigrant kids are there and people, you know, brown and black kids. And in this case we grab them for two years of intensive services and we help them graduate. And our graduation rates are the same or even better than the graduation rates of the rest of the students in the university. And I'm very proud to be part of that program because you kind of, you know, I went through my own challenges as an immigrant person in the States.

00:06:01 Sally Kuhlman: I'd say we're both passion driven and we've both worked in nonprofit social justice and educational organization for many years. I started working with Spectrum LGBT Center, I was trying to remember, in the early 2000s, I was working on their website and I got them set up on social media when social media was brand new and helped coordinate their big events.

And then I guess I think we're both drawn to working with the community and helping others just because of our own lived experiences. Like Celia mentioned, being an immigrant to this country. She had to learn how to speak English and deal with an accent and people's reactions to that. And then my own experience of coming from a WASP family community and then coming out in a relationship with a woman has just given us different perspectives than we would have had otherwise.

00:06:56 Benja Thompson: Yeah. Yeah. Thank you both. Let's see, could you tell a story of a shared memory or something from being in a relationship?

00:07:12 Sally Kuhlman: Yeah. Well, we raised our family. We raised three children in Mill Valley, actually. And I'd say we're very privileged in that we didn't have to think about, well, now we don't have to think about our queerness at all. We just get to be ourselves here in Mill Valley. We never felt threatened for being in a same-sex couple, and there were a few awkward moments back in the nineties with some of the dads at the kids' school that asked inappropriate questions because it was so foreign to them to see two women raising kids together in the nineties. But we're very lucky that we always felt very safe, and safety's always been a priority for us. Anything else you want to share?

00:07:58 Celia Graterol: No, that's good.

00:08:00 Benja Thompson: Yeah, I'm glad to hear that you both have felt safe here.

00:08:04 Sally Kuhlman: Yeah.

00:08:05 Benja Thompson: That's important.

00:08:06 Sally Kuhlman: It is. And we're very grateful for that.

00:08:11 Benja Thompson: And so you – I believe you were married in 2008, is that correct?

00:08:17 Sally Kuhlman: Yes.

00:08:18 Benja Thompson: This was after many years of being together as a couple. And right after the state of California legalized same-sex marriage. Can you share your memories of that time or what you're feeling as that sort of shift in the nation seemed to be happening?

00:08:40 Sally Kuhlman: Do you want to talk?

00:08:42 Celia Graterol: I mean, for me, it was awesome. It's just great to feel normal, you know? It was one step towards normalizing, normalizing being gay. I mean, it's just it's not any different. We were like an old pickering couple right now, like any –

00:08:59 Sally Kuhlman: Bickering.

00:09:00 Celia Graterol: – straight couple is just the same thing. And that was a big step towards – it's not a big deal. At least for me it was. I think it was awesome. I never thought I was going to live through that. I thought that was not going to be coming on my lifetime, right? I have to say, I was like, 'Oh my God, this is cool!'

00:09:23 Sally Kuhlman: True. Yeah. We didn't even think that was a concept when we first got together. And that was in 2008 so that's when Prop 8 was happening. And so that's when we got married and we knew it was really likely that Prop 8 was going to pass. So we ended up actually having a shotgun wedding. It was a joke, but we got married three days, I believe, before the election in 2008. And so she said we were normalized, but that was the weird time when we were like married by the state of California, but not by the federal. So we were in this strange loophole with taxes and everything else.

00:10:04 Celia Graterol: And the election was very bittersweet because [Barack] Obama won the election. But I still remember Obama saying that he was for civil unions, for gay couples.

00:10:13 Sally Kuhlman: But not same-sex marriage.

00:10:15 Celia Graterol: But no same-sex marriage. He was not supportive of us being like regular people from the very beginning. And people forget about that.

00:10:24 Sally Kuhlman: People always forget about that. It wasn't until later that Obama came around, but yeah.

00:10:27 Benja Thompson: Yeah, such a difference 15 years ago where if, you know, a Democratic president ran with that now, it would be a very different thing. Just to show how much progress is made.

00:10:39 Sally Kuhlman: Yes, right. And the reason that Obama explains, tries to explain now, that he wasn't saying he's for it before is the polls predicted if he were to come out as for gay marriage, same-sex marriage, whatever, he wouldn't have won at the time. So you're right. 15 years later, it's a whole new world.

00:10:59 Celia Graterol: For the better.

00:11:00 Sally Kuhlman: Yeah, but yeah, so that was the election that Obama won and then Prop 8 passed. And so it was actually a quite painful time for me, because we had friends and family that we knew who loved us, loved our kids, us as a family and still voted for Prop 8 because of their own religious beliefs. They could not get over that hang up with that. So that was very hurtful at the time, I have to say.

00:11:27 Benja Thompson: Mmhmm. And to Celia's point of it being something that would like, you know, more than anything, it was a normalizing thing. It just allowed you to exist, as so many other people do, without even having to think about it.

00:11:42 Sally Kuhlman: And gave us more rights like, you know, the benefits at her work and before San Francisco State was a little progressive, whereas they gave us benefits for domestic partnership before a marriage was legalized. However, they made us prove our partnership every year with a notary and all sorts of paperwork which cisgendered married couples didn't have to do. And so we would go into her office with this big old folder of proof that, like, we did this, this and this, we have notary papers, we own this house. And it was ridiculous. So that went on for years.

00:12:16 Benja Thompson: Yeah. And so then in 2013, I believe you were featured in a *Marin Independent Journal* article celebrating the Supreme Court upholding the Defense of Marriage Act. How was it that you came to be featured in the article, and what is your recollection of that moment?

00:12:40 Celia Graterol: That's because Sally is famous, the famous one.

00:12:46 Sally Kuhlman: Well, the fun part was I remember the reporter and photographer came to our house at five in the morning and sat with us to wait for the ruling. And we were just so excited. And then how was it? Well, you asked how we got to be the ones featured. It was from my online presence. I was big on social media in the early years and Twitter.

I used to organize tweet ups in Mill Valley and bring people together and I blogged all the time about my life. So I was very open online, about my family, about being with a woman. I'd say I was loud and proud online. I did a lot of my activism through my writing, and it reached people all over the country and world.

Because in the early days when I started writing, people would, people would reach out to me in private messages and emails and just be like, 'Thank you for sharing. I know someone who's gay.' It was such a big deal in the nineties that you can't even comprehend right now. And the early 2000s, apparently, because we're talking about 2013.

Wow. Times move fast. I mean, yeah, I mean, it's only been the last few years that we are where we are today, but that's how we got featured in the article because the *IJ* found me online because I was just blabbing about everything. And so that's how they got to know me.

00:14:05 Benja Thompson: I'm so glad it was a celebratory moment. If it was like at the verdict.

00:14:11 Sally Kuhlman: I know, if it wouldn't have passed. It would have been a different article. Yeah. Yeah. So that was fun and, oh, go ahead... I was just going to say, I think you asked about how the reception was of the article or how the community, because we were featured or there's a picture of us and we were associated with this whole movement.

And I used to joke that we were like the poster children of Marin County for, for same-sex marriage or the legalization of marriage. I don't know what the proper term is now, marriage equality? And it was super positive. Everybody, our neighbors, our friends, the whole community. And by then, most of the people that voted for Prop 8 had come around and realized that, oops, we shouldn't be mixing religion and state.

And that's when the shift really started happening for the whole queer community, I think, was that year 2013, because then finally it was something that was some big tipping point and just suddenly people were just way more accepting and acting like they always had been. Like Obama and everyone else.

00:15:22 Benja Thompson: Yeah, yeah. Well, I'm glad to hear that. It was a time of positivity as opposed to what it sounds like it may have been previously.

00:15:35 Celia Graterol: Yeah.

00:15:38 Benja Thompson: And then how would you characterize the LGBTQ+ community of Mill Valley or Marin in general?

00:15:49 Sally Kuhlman: We were talking about that. Well, Mill Valley, I would say it's fairly nonexistent, but there are a few couples here and there that we've met throughout the years. We

personally don't have a community in Mill Valley. In the olden days in Marin County, there was a bar called Aunt Ruby's, a gay bar in San Rafael that we used to go to.

But that was a very not big community either. I mean, San Francisco's right there. But we built our community here around parenting and around her sport. She's a big mountain biker, and that's where our friends have come from. And so we don't, there's not a big LGBTQ community, at least of older adults that I'm aware of in Marin. There are people, but they're just living their lives, raising kids. There's not that 'feel.' Right, would you say?

00:16:39 Celia Graterol: Yeah, I will say that. Okay.

00:16:43 Benja Thompson: Yeah. Just through some research I've been doing, such as reading old issues of *The Slant*, which was a, like, gay newspaper of the nineties. They would have events at I believe Lunacee, a gay bar in Marin County. So this is interesting to hear. Like the different connections that are made through like sports or through parenting.

00:17:11 Sally Kuhlman: Mmhmm. Yeah, and Lunacee might be one of the iterations of the Aunt Ruby's. It changed names a few times before it fully closed down. It's in San Rafael by where Office Depot used to be. Um, yeah, I remember that there was *The Slant* and there was also, like a Pink Pages, which was like the Yellow Pages before the Internet to find gay friendly businesses. Yeah. And so that's how you would know that it was a safe, safe business.

00:17:42 Benja Thompson: Yeah. The Internet does seem to have changed a lot about how communities can form.

00:17:47 Sally Kuhlman: Definitely. Yeah, when I was young in the nineties, I would just get my hands on every newspaper magazine I could that mentioned anything about the queer community because it was so isolating. I remember I used to save all the newspaper articles just about LGBTQ parents and the Internet's really changed that because then you realize you're not the only one. It felt like we were the only parents in a same-sex marriage when our kids were little. We didn't know any others in Marin County. So it was, yeah, we definitely stood out at the kids' school as a different family.

00:18:29 Benja Thompson: And then what would you say that community means to you? Whether a community of parents or a community of mountain bikers? What does it mean to be a part of something larger?

00:18:43 Sally Kuhlman: You want to go?

00:18:44 Celia Graterol: Yeah. I mean, for me, community means networking and friendship, support, love, gathering around a fun activity. In my case is, you know, hiking, mountain biking, roller skating. It's just I use these activities and then to just wrap around now I'm into beer making. So then I love inviting people. I just finish a giant Jenga with Sally and, and some cornhole that we did. I like to fabricate my own things. And it's, yeah, it's company.

00:19:21 Sally Kuhlman: People who are there for you. Yeah. Who show up. But yeah, we actually like to bring people together. So we organize hikes and bike rides and yeah.

00:19:32 Celia Graterol: It's fun. Even during COVID. During COVID, we had a backyard, an amazing backyard and then we had like a big tent with a fire pit and a barbecue, and we used to do like mountain bike rides or hikes, and we would gather and then we will be separate, socially outdoors, but warm and then people were coming because that was like the only gathering, social gathering that we were having. And again, you know, our house is by one of the trailheads to go into the GGNRA so, oh, my God, I don't know, we were very privileged to be able to do that. But it was awesome to gather around community and still be doing social distance and being safe to not, you know, to not get infected. We didn't know what about this COVID thing. Not even COVID stopped us from socializing, having events at our house.

00:20:36 Benja Thompson: And then if I can ask, how did you get started mountain biking?

00:20:40 Celia Graterol: I started mountain biking... I started road riding because one of Sally's bosses, gave Sally as a bonus a road bike. And I was, after the three kids I was overweight and out of shape, and then I started commuting on my road bike to San Francisco State. I have worked at San Francisco State for a long time. And then I became an avid road cyclist. I was doing the Centuries, the Marin Centuries, I was part of the Marin Cyclists, wonderful group of people, very welcoming.

But then a friend of mine told me, 'Celia, you live next to a trailhead and you haven't tried mountain biking? Mountain biking? Really?' And I just bought a, I remember, a Gary Fisher Tassajara. \$300 bike, and I tried mountain biking on dirt. It reminds me of when I used to open the trails with the machete, miles, being in the jungle, you know, and the snakes, you know, like we went hiking in a Marin mountain and we saw two snakes, you know, we were looking for flowers this week. So it's just I don't know. And then after that, just the rest is history. I just loved it. You know, this being in nature plus a little bit of adrenaline is just, oh, my God. I'm in heaven when I'm on my bike.

00:22:04 Benja Thompson: Yeah. Oh, that sounds great.

00:22:06 Celia Graterol: Yeah. And it's amazing.

00:22:10 Benja Thompson: And then would you be comfortable sharing your coming out processes at a time with less visibility and representation? How did you express and I guess discover your identity?

00:22:26 Celia Graterol: Well, I had, we had three kids and they were little and I didn't want, I wanted my kids to be with moms that are proud of being who they are. So from there, since I got together with Sally, we were out, I was out. I was like, I am not going to be embarrassed of who I am. I need to, I have three children that they need to look up to me.

00:22:49 Sally Kuhlman: We also didn't want to lie because we don't want our kids to lie. So we needed to model honesty.

00:22:55 Celia Graterol: And because we were in Mill Valley in Marin and it was safe for us to also do that. A little scary, you know, maybe a little awkward. We had a couple, I mean, maybe one family didn't want one of their kids to have play days with my kids.

00:23:12 Sally Kuhlman: Because we were sinners.

00:23:13 Celia Graterol: Yeah, because, yeah, we weren't. But that was really honestly-

00:23:17 Sally Kuhlman: It was rare. Yeah, we weren't, we weren't threatened. It was only awkward or sometimes unpleasant situations, but we felt like, again, the word safe comes up. But yeah, so our, our coming out was us being together was how we came out and just we had to be out because we were parents and we were in the community. And so we didn't have a choice.

00:23:38 Celia Graterol: I think one of our hardest thing was, hardest thing to do was to work with the schools, where their databases were not prepared for divorced couples, let alone when one of the couples was a same sex couple. So they were not prepared for that. They were not. But I mean, we're very lucky to be in this part of the world being gay.

00:24:07 Sally Kuhlman: Yes. And we were really aware of our privilege and how lucky we are. Um, and even with our own families, it was fine. But I'd say the hardest part for me in coming out in Marin and in the Bay Area was coming out as a parent because Celia is a biological mom. But we raised the kids together and that was the hardest part for the community of parents to accept that I was also a parent. And even though I was doing the daily grind of what moms do, they would always refer to the kids as Celia's kids. And it took a long time for people to accept that they were both our kids. I mean, still to this day it happens. And I'm always trying to explain it, but, um, but that's it. I mean, people other than that, there hasn't been any issues.

00:25:00 Celia Graterol: Yeah. And Sally is the best mom. When shit hits a fan, they always go totally first, first you and then me. Maybe.

00:25:16 Benja Thompson: Do you have a favorite place in Mill Valley or Marin County? Maybe to visit as a family?

00:25:23 Celia Graterol: My backyard. My backyard is like - and I installed it all myself. A firepit with a plumber that is a friend. My barbecue. I have a brewery now and I have a hot tub. You know, finally we got the hot tub.

00:25:41 Sally Kuhlman: You make it sound like - we have this very small backyard. She made it sound huge. Everything's like -

00:25:46 Celia Graterol: Oh, it's a tiny little thing. But it's, and we have birds. We feed the birds. So we have -

00:25:51 Sally Kuhlman: I think we fell in love with our backyard during COVID because we were stuck in our house for the last three years. So we really cultivated that space. And the trails. We both love getting out in nature. So that's what we would love. That's what we love to do, either hiking or biking. And we're lucky that we are in walking distance to the trailheads of GGNRA.

00:26:15 Benja Thompson: And then is there anything you hope to see in Mill Valley in the future?

00:26:20 Sally Kuhlman: Both of us came up with the same answer when we asked each other. It was more diversity.

00:26:24 Celia Graterol: I would love to see a little bit more diversity.

00:26:26 Sally Kuhlman: Oftentimes throughout the years we felt like we were the diversity, especially her being an immigrant, but being the gay couple too. So more diversity would be a good thing.

00:26:37 Celia Graterol: However, it does feel really, like today, it's rare when I think about my own gayness, I just don't think about it. It's just normal. Yeah, you know, our middle child, non-binary, actually told us one time it's like, 'Mom, just you and Sally, you're your regular, normal, heteronormative couple of two cis women.' It's like I'm rolling their eyes.

I mean, but it's awesome. I just love being normal. It's like nobody even notices this. Like, we are who we are. I go to yoga. It's not even an issue. It's so nice. And it is not taking away from anybody, it's awesome. So I, I hope that we continue pushing the limits, you know, now it's another wave. And it's hard for me, you know, with the language, you know, I grew up with he, she. Why do we need to be, why there is not a continuous for Christ's sake. We're so fluid, you know. We're so different from each other and we don't need to be feeding on, you know, and we have our own child pushing the envelope in our own family and it's awesome. I just love it. I love to... Humans should be able to express themselves as long as they're not hurting others just to be happy. You know, however you want to be. And I really think the Bay Area is an amazing place to live for that. I don't think it's the same, you know, in other places in the world, in the country. But Bay Area is awesome.

00:28:27 Benja Thompson: Yeah, absolutely. And then of course, you can say no. But may I ask, what has your experience been raising a non-binary identified child?

00:28:42 Sally Kuhlman: I would say a learning experience. They came out as non-binary in the first wave, I'd say, when nobody had heard the concept before. It was more than ten years ago now, I believe. And so they introduced us to the concept of non-binary. And you know, at the time we're like, isn't that androgynous? So they educated us a lot and the whole pronouns.

And in the beginning it was hard for our brains. And so I am more compassionate now with people who we're now introducing it to when we, when we talk about our child. However, I'm starting to lose my patience because now with the Internet and everything, now it's not a new concept anymore. And so, and I get it. If you mess up and say someone's pronouns incorrectly, you just correct yourself, maybe apologize, but keep going and don't make it a big scene.

And then, I also often think about our child when they were educating us, and everything nonbinary and trans related, if you replace the word with gay or same sex 20 years ago, they're going through the exact same fight we went through to be together and even before us, people went through much worse stuff.

So, it's, yeah. But now I, I'm very grateful for our child because we've learned a lot from them and it helped us get ahead of the curve and not be the people, now they're like, 'I'm not going to say they.' I mean, that's getting to be such an old argument. And so, yeah.

00:30:18 Celia Graterol: And I remember in Spanish I got a little gut reaction because it's Spanish, it's my mother language. And then, you know, I didn't like the Latinx thing. I like the Latine, you know to do the 'ey,' which is the 'a' is usually female, 'o' is usually male, the vowel. So the 'ey' is more neutral and is becoming really natural, you know, Latine, and elle and ele. It's just, we just gotta be flexible.

00:30:54 Sally Kuhlman: That something else we learned thanks to our child. As I used to work for an organization Beyond Differences where we provide curriculum to middle schools all across the nation and we always translated into Spanish and years ago we started translating into gender, gender fluid Spanish, which is really mind bending for translators because Spanish is so masculine/feminine. But actually our child helped us with the translator and so we put out, I'm going to guess that we probably put out the first translated Spanish non gender confirming, How would you say it? You know what I mean? The curriculum, which was really cool. It went out all across the nation.

00:31:39 Benja Thompson: That is really cool.

00:31:41 Sally Kuhlman: Yeah.

00:31:41 Benja Thompson: Thank you for that. And then would you have any advice for fellow members of the LGBTQ+ community of Mill Valley, Marin County, the Bay Area, or beyond?

00:31:58 Sally Kuhlman: My advice would be to be yourself and be open to meeting people. Like, don't make assumptions that just because everyone in Mill Valley might look like a blond woman going to yoga, that she's not going to be accepting of you or the families aren't. Just give people a chance, get to know them. Let them get to know you. Be patient with people as their brains evolve to understand the whole queer community. And yeah, that's my advice because I think I didn't do that when I was younger. And now looking back, I wish I would have been more confident in myself and realized that most people around here are pretty nice. They're not out to get me, they just might be confused. And so you got to give them a chance to learn and categorize in their brain where they're going to fit. You know, that's the beauty of living in Mill Valley.