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Silver Lake Chamber of Commerce

Since its inception in 1987, the Silver Lake Chamber of Commerce (SLCC) has represented the business interests of Silver Lake, serving a community renowned for its inclusiveness and embrace of self-expression. This scenic Los Angeles neighborhood surrounding sparkling reservoirs enjoys a national reputation as a cutting-edge arts mecca – notable for its landmark Modernist architecture, burgeoning alternative-rock scene and location just east of Hollywood – with a small-town feel and a live-and-let-live attitude.

Attests prominent theater artist and Silver Laker Michael Kearns, “I am the HIV-positive parent of an African-American daughter, and our little family finds acceptance on these streets, in these shops, at these markets and from our neighbors.”

“Diversity is not only tolerated in Silver Lake; it’s celebrated,” adds SLCC Chairwoman Dyan Collings Ralph. “That was very important to my wife and me when we decided to open a Curves franchise here in 2003. But it’s much more than polite acceptance; there’s a genuine sense of neighborhood and of shared passions binding us together, and that’s reflected in the Chamber.”

The forward-looking nature of the community has influenced the Chamber to likewise keep its horizons broad. Its mission “to serve business and community needs in a progressive, innovative manner, promoting the benefits of living, working and shopping in Silver Lake” makes explicit its conception as “a networking organization for all aspects of Silver Lake life, not just business,” according to Chamber President Dr. Cheryl Revkin, a 30-year resident who co-founded the SLCC.

“We actively solicited membership from local schools, LAPD Senior Lead Officers, community nonprofit organizations, health-care facilities and other representatives of the community in addition to the traditional base of retail storefronts,” Revkin illustrates. The Chamber’s approach remains holistic, underlined by an abiding belief that if the community prospers, businesses in the community will also thrive.

Addressing another way in which the SLCC is unique, Collings Ralph ventures: “Chambers of commerce tend to be politically conservative and oriented toward growth. Ours seeks to embrace the values of all our residents and to be an advocate for responsible growth.” Eschewing the stuffiness of the

standard chamber, the SLCC has also made a point of mirroring what Collings Ralph calls the “infectious joy” percolating throughout Silver Lake. Among the Chamber’s early outreach successes: pageants. “We did three years of Queen of Silver Lake pageants, which evolved into a dog pageant and then a pageant for elementary-school kids,” Revkin relates. “These events helped create a ‘brand’ for the neighborhood that was clearly not the work of your typical, strictly business-oriented Chamber of Commerce.”

Most recently the Chamber has distinguished itself through the work of its Green Committee, which aims to assist local businesses and the community in adopting sustainable practices. A major project entails working with area restaurants to help them manage food waste and switch to biodegradable carry-out materials. With a goal of zero waste, the SLCC wants Silver Lake to be a model for the entire city of Los Angeles.

The Silver Lake Chamber of Commerce is an all-volunteer nonprofit boasting a core of roughly 280 organizations, individuals and independently operated businesses. Its five business districts are defined as Glendale Blvd., Hyperion Ave., Rowena Ave., Silver Lake Blvd. and Sunset Blvd., though its constituents also encompass Atwater Village and a cornucopia of at-large members based throughout the region.

Joining Collings Ralph and Revkin in the Chamber leadership are Ilka Erren Pardiñas (Vice President), Ann Le (Treasurer) and Jennie Redner (Secretary), as well as David Etzen, who serves as the SLCC’s Creative Director, and Paige Gold, Editor of the acclaimed quarterly Silver Planet newsletter.

The Chamber’s District Representative Board members – essentially this body’s connective tissue – are Erika Glass (Glendale); Christine Fernandez (Hyperion); Erren Pardiñas (Rowena); Karen Numme and Caroline Luat Young, aka Pinky Jones (Silver Lake/East Sunset); Steve Melendrez (Sunset); Revkin (Atwater); and James Standish and Meg Dickler-Taylor (at-large members). The reps function as liaisons between the members in their respective districts and the Chamber Board, at the same time striving to strengthen membership ties among districts.

The SLCC Board – whom Collings Ralph calls “an amazingly talented and passionate group of people” – meets monthly, but its dedicated members conduct Board correspondence on

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a near-daily basis; many issues are discussed and sometimes voted on via e-mail between meetings. There is much to do. In addition to maintaining a network of professional and business contacts and encouraging Angelenos to shop, dine and become familiar with Silver Lake's many resources and attractions, the Board supports programs related to crime prevention, parking mitigation and small-business management, among other areas.

Still, in Collings Ralph's estimation, the Chamber perhaps shines most brightly in providing "access to shared brainpower and shared resources." These manifest themselves in referrals; cooperative and low-cost advertising; the Silver Planet; member links and announcements on the highly trafficked chamber website (www.silverlakechamber.com), quarterly mixers, association with the media-friendly yearly fundraiser; enhanced access to the Los Angeles City Council, community organizations and schools; directory listings and more. "The Silver Lake Chamber of Commerce Member Directory has incredible reach; we distribute 10,000 copies throughout the area," Collings Ralph informs. "And I don't mind adding that it's been printed on 100% recycled paper for the past five years."

Without a doubt, the Chamber's advocacy is a many-splendored thing. In any given instance, it functions as a civic clearinghouse, a media consultancy, a human-relations forum, an information bureau, a social network and, most fundamentally, a service for matching community resources to community needs. This flexibility is critical to serving a membership that runs the gamut from auto care, banking, printing, lodging and wholesale goods to feng shui, recovery services, alternative medicine, life coaching and astrological readings.

Considering this variety, it's no surprise that the quarterly Silver Lake Chamber of Commerce mixers are lively affairs. They tend to meld business – say, an exploration of how a commercial property was modified to prevent stormwater pollution – with pleasure (exceptional food and drink are provided by Chamber members). More than one prospective member has reported attending just to stick a toe in the Chamber waters and coming away feeling, "These are my people."

Belonging, being part of something, is surely a hallmark of membership in the Silver Lake Chamber of Commerce. "In terms of return on investment in promoting my business, joining the Chamber is unparalleled by any other action I could have taken as a new business owner," says Collings Ralph. "Just as important, though, Chamber membership makes a statement that we care about our community, that we're committed to Silver Lake. That community spirit is its own reward, of course, but it also translates into an enormous amount of commercial goodwill; small businesses flourish here because local consumers reward community involvement and are fiercely loyal to the businesses that serve them well."

Collings Ralph returns to that singularly Silver Lake *joie de vivre*, remarking, "We don't just celebrate this community; we celebrate the idea of community." Revkin is certainly no stranger to that notion. "I run into my patients, friends, Chamber colleagues at local events and shops and restaurants," she says. "We all believe in the values – diversity, creativity, sustainability, wellness, social and political activism – that define Silver Lake. Thanks to my work with the Chamber, I'm privileged to live an integrated life. We want to share that with as many of our neighbors as we can." □□□□

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