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**When History and
Community Intersect**
*Meet Curators Helen Rischbieth
and Bennett Hall*

When History and Community Intersect

Meet Curators Helen Rischbieth and Bennett Hall

By Lisa Carlson

Photos by Gary Schatan and Courtesy of Bennett Hall

The name Bennett Hall may sound like a building on a fancy university campus, but trust me, he is a person: a photographer, art consultant and designer, curator of history and community exhibits. He lives in the Montclair hills, in a house he shares in the Snake/Thornhill area with Helen Rischbieth, his Australian wife and partner. They were married in Joaquin Miller Park, exchanging their vows while standing in the middle of the cascade holding flaming torches, and recently celebrated their 20th anniversary.

Tree House in the Hills

After decades in San Francisco, Bennett moved to the Oakland hills with Helen, first to Skyline at Shepherd Canyon. In 2007, they discovered a unique property. Cantilevered on steel I-beams, Japanese style merged with mid-century modern on a private cul-de-sac.

"We had to have it. Buying this house was an impulse decision driven by passion for its architecture and rock-star views," he said. They named it SkyHouse. Now their live/work studio, the downstairs is dedicated to digital media and printing exhibit programs.

Creating Relevant Environments

Bennett and Helen's core enterprise, Business Image Group, provides "art and exhibit programs for health care, government, enterprise and hospitality clients seeking to create elegant environments that are also relevant to their history, community and brand." Programs feature historical and community exhibits, artwork, murals and signage. Notable clients have included Fremont's Washington Hospital, U.S. District Courts, Charles Schwab, Hills Brothers Coffee, Palace and Starwood Hotels.



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Sustainable Picture Framing

Bennett owns a conservation framing studio, Eco Framing, which fulfills the production needs of his business projects. It operates from a 5,000 square foot East Oakland facility, which is open to the public. They have created a wholesale-direct approach to picture framing that eliminates waste, quickens turnaround and enables affordable pricing. "This is the first custom picture-framing studio truly dedicated to 'green' best practices by design from the ground up," Bennett notes. If you get to know Bennett as a neighbor or friend, he might invite you to his home to design a picture frame or two or advise on your design ideas in your residence. For more: eco-framing.com

Palo Alto Native Meets Aussie

Bennett Hall grew up in Palo Alto and graduated from Palo Alto High School. As befits the work he does, he went on to major in art photography at San Francisco State University.

Helen, who hails from Adelaide, met Bennett at an investor meeting in 2000, when he was seeking a Series-A round for his company. Helen was the founder of her company, recently funded by the same VC, and she was relocating to the States. Helen, a sports physiotherapist and



Photo by Gary Schatan



The living room at SkyHouse

Feldenkrais® practitioner, had her own practice and a large team back home in Adelaide. "That led to forming an early-stage company, TORSON, that produced 4D anatomically correct human virtualization for medical education and entertainment-media applications," she said.

"That's what brought her to America that year," Bennett explained, "and how we met by pure serendipity." Ultimately, Helen moved on from her company to join Bennett in developing his firm.

Go to Court, Learn about Local History

Imagine yourself a juror, witness, plaintiff or lawyer between court sessions wandering the corridors of a vast courthouse. Throughout the U.S. District Courts in Northern California, you will find educational immersive exhibits of local history. These programs were designed and produced by Helen and Bennett in collaboration with Judge Charles Breyer over the past 20 years.

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"Bennett and Helen magically transformed our court facilities in Northern California with educational historical displays, providing an experience that connects us to the community we serve, a shared legacy for all."

—Senior Judge Charles Breyer, U.S. District Court Northern District of California

Content for the four courthouses in San Francisco, Oakland, San Jose, and McKinleyville was researched from dozens of sources and their own archives. After selection, images were digitized at high resolution and restored for archival printing. Each image has been paired with detailed captions, completing the program through authentic narratives. "The scope is vast – overall the exhibits throughout the region, if placed in a line, would be a mile and half long," said Bennett.

"Jurors and guards love it – and security officers are now local history buffs."

Currently they are redesigning the federal courthouse in San Jose, which will feature reproductions of New Deal murals, such as those at Coit Tower. Bennett reproduces the murals using his Fuji GFX100 100-megapixel medium format camera. Prints up to 16' long are then made in their Montclair studio on fine art bamboo paper, optimal for replicating the original frescoes.

A Grand Hotel

He has produced similar programs involving local history for hotels – notably the Palace and Omni in San Francisco and the Century Plaza Hotel in Los Angeles. In the mid-'90s, he had just completed their 30th anniversary exhibits featuring 20th Century Fox "back lots" that became the site for the hotel, and its presidential and celebrity guests. After the opening, a new assignment emerged to re-imagine their tower's penthouse. The hotel retained Bennett to spend a week in its magnificent rooms and develop a master plan. As Ronald Reagan had been the tower's first guest when it opened in 1984 and stayed so often while President that the press dubbed it the "Western White House," Bennett proposed rebranding it "the Ronald Reagan Suite." The remodeling featured photographs of Reagan from his youth, including Hollywood celebrity days through his terms in office. "There were even original Oliphant cartoons that the President loved, due to his sense of humor," said Bennett. The penthouse rental rate increased ten-fold post renovation. Nancy Reagan was guest of honor at the grand opening celebration.

The Heart of Rock and Roll

Bennett met Huey Lewis through an exhibit of his art photography at the Magic Theater in San Francisco. "He loved my way of hand-tinting photographs with an edgy documentary style. It was clear that Huey's new album would be a massive hit requiring a distinctive look," said Bennett. The album's location concept was rooted in Huey's observation that rock stars played in stadiums, just like sports teams – hence it was named "SPORTS." After scouting Oakland Coliseum in 1983, Huey decided



Community History Exhibits, Alameda and Contra Costa County, US District Court, 4th floor Lobby, Oakland



First Lady Nancy Reagan admires Bennett Hall's display in the Ronald Reagan Suite of the Century Plaza Hotel in Los Angeles

that a sports bar was the perfect visual metaphor for the album – ultimately selecting Mill Valley's 2AM club in Huey's hometown. Bennett's role was both photographer and art director, designing the cover from a hand-tinted collage of six images. Later, Bennett created Huey's next album, "FORE!" and many singles.

Becoming Entrepreneurial

After co-founding a fashion boutique for women's accessories on Maiden Lane with then partner Gwen Mazer, Bennett opened his own gallery and photo studio in Union Square on Powell Street, at the cable-car turnaround. This became ground zero for Business Image Group and his picture framing. This spacious gallery with its 25' ceiling and Steinway piano, hosted many events, including the launch party for Sun's Java language program.

Unable to ignore the difficult street conditions in the area due to the homeless and crime, Bennett became interested in civic contribution. In 1993, he hosted a public meeting that led to partnering with Supervisor Angela Alioto, BART, SFPD, KIMCO Hotels, Nordstrom, Flood Building and others, forging a strategy that led to the formation of San Francisco's first Business Improvement District, patterned after successful BIDs at New York's Time Square and in Sacramento. Bennett ran this as its co-founder and CEO until 1997.

At one notable meeting at the Powell Street headquarters, Bennett pitched Washington Hospital's then CEO Nancy Farber and her team to his strategy of creating hospital art programs as a way to tie in to their communities. After his presentation, she exclaimed: "Gentlemen, this is exactly what we want, now make it happen!" The program began in 1997 and continues to this day.

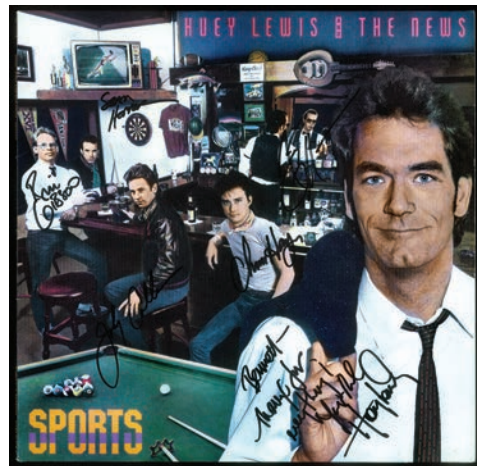
Learning and Travel

With more time at home due to the pandemic, the couple has been exploring their interests and developing new skills with the help of online Master Classes. Their passions include architecture, hiking, nutrition and cooking, politics and climate change. Bennett plans to set up a home music studio to continue his improvisational piano playing.

"We are keen to travel as soon as viable with road trips around the U.S. followed by a worldwide 'bucket list,'" said Helen. A visit to her hometown, Adelaide and other parts of Australia for extended trips will be key.

Community Engagement is a Labor of Love

For 20 years, Bennett has been involved in a range of lobbying activities on behalf of the community, starting on Skyline Drive, where he focused on mitigating the effects of racing motorcycles and speeding motorists. Later, at his East Oakland frame shop, he pressured the City to improve strategies to stop chronic illegal dumping. Bennett's love of social media led to his regular posts on Next Door, which readers have likely seen. He founded several Facebook groups, notably Oakland's leading community group, "Oakland Now!" with over 5,000 members sharing opinions and



Bennett Hall designed this album cover for Huey Lewis.

strategies on all things Oakland. Previously, he developed regional history groups for Oakland and San Francisco.

Motto: It's never too late to learn something new and apply your knowledge as a contribution to your community — that's the essence of staying young, relevant and in the game.

Links:

Business Image Group: businessimagegroup.com

Bennett's Picture framing business: eco-framing.com

Bennett Hall's Image Collections on Flickr: [flickr.com/photos/bennethall/collections](https://www.flickr.com/photos/bennethall/collections)

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