

Legendary Civic Activist Harry Lawrence

aka “Mr. Laguna”

Harry Lawrence has the nickname of "Mr. Laguna" for a good reason. A Laguna Beach resident since 1947, Lawrence has been the force behind numerous organizations and beautification movements that make Laguna what it is today.

Despite numerous trips spanning the globe – he's been to 155 countries – Lawrence always scheduled his travels to be home for Chamber of Commerce meetings. "You don't do all the things I've done without continuous work," Lawrence said.

His civic activities are legendary

Over the past 60 years, Harry Lawrence lavished a love of beauty on Laguna Beach making it the special place it is and so today. He organized the cleanup of the Rockledge area, founded the Laguna Beach Chamber of Commerce's Beautification Council in 1952, and was a leader in getting the South Coast Medical Center built. As an officer of the Laguna Beach Playhouse, Lawrence was a leading advocate for the construction of the current theater, the loan for which he personally co-signed. He was in the forefront of the effort that created Main Beach Park, – now fondly known as “*Our Window to the Sea*”.

He served on just about every Civic Organization in the City and one after the other recognized his contribution. He has been the recipient of the Exchange Club's “Golden Deeds Award”, the Rotary Club's “Paul Harris Fellowship”, the Chamber's Mermaid' Beautification Sweepstake Award”; Patriots Day Parade “Citizen of the Year” and Grand Marshal. Mayor Tom Bradley also recognized him as one of the co-founders of the International Trade Association. The Chamber of Commerce bestowed a Lifetime Achievement Award and a “Person of the Year” Award to Harry; which has officially become the “Harry Lawrence Person of the Year” Award which is given out annually during the Chamber's “Spirit of Laguna” Awards and Board Installation Ceremonies.

History

Harry is a WWII veteran who managed to see the world and try his hand at a number of jobs before putting down roots in Laguna Beach. Born in San Bernardino in 1914 and raised in Long Beach, he studied architecture. However, it didn't really grab him, so Lawrence joined the merchant marines as a seaman in 1934 and traveled to ports throughout Asia. He also put in time as a fruit picker in Washington and a carpenter's assistant for the railroad before completing his education at Woodbury College in Los Angeles in 1937.

Lawrence founded the Junior International Trade Association in Los Angeles, and worked at a steamship company and as a trader for an import-export company, before ending up in marine insurance with Fireman's Fund. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, he enlisted in the Navy, leaving behind his wife, Maxine.

Having started out as a petty officer, Lawrence was chosen for officer candidate school and after completing a ship-handling course he was put in command of LCI-329, an amphibious ship with a crew of 32 that could carry 225 Marines. He made 22 landings in the Pacific before returning to the U.S. in January 1945 for more training. He then served as first lieutenant on an attack cargo ship that was heading towards the Pacific when the war ended.

Lawrence resumed his job with Fireman's Fund, but not for long. When Laguna friends Earl and Florence Warren offered to sell their gift shop, Lawrence and his wife jumped at the opportunity to start their own business. They purchased Warren Imports on S. Coast Highway and moved to Laguna Beach with their small daughter in 1947. Through renovations and additions, they created the Art Center (now the French 75 complex), offering Asian art and antiques. Harry's annual trips to the Orient made such an impression on him that he completed and presented more than 100 slide shows and lectures throughout the U.S. on the art, religious and cultural background of China.

After 60 successful years; Harry closed Warren Imports this past December. This year Harry will celebrate his 95th birthday on October 1st – which will be officially declared “Harry Lawrence Day” in Laguna Beach!

One on One with Harry:

We spoke with Lawrence about his life's work and why community service matters.

Q: What motivates your civic service?

A: I stand for clean, quaint culture – everything is guided by that short statement, and look what's happened.

It took 21 years of work creating Main Beach. The police chief challenged me in 1950 – at the time, there was a bowling alley there, and bars. It took our team 21 years in creating what you see today. I asked why we can't buy that property through the city. It cost \$3 million – to me, it's worth \$100 million, to have that beach from Hotel Laguna to Las Brisas.

That's just me. Things needed to be done, and I do my best to help. I have great joy being surrounded by good people, unselfish people with good objectives. You'd be surprised. God has always looked out for me in impossible situations. I know if I do the right thing, all will be well.

Q: You have an amazing list of accomplishments. Of which are you most proud?

A: The most important was being the head of reorganizing the Chamber of Commerce and starting the Chamber's Beautification Committee. I was also the Playhouse treasurer and became president of the Playhouse.

Q: What sparked your interest in Asian art?

A: Being in the Merchant Marines and seeing all the beautiful things in Japan, China and the Philippines. I don't know, it all fell together... That was my background, and my interest just grew and grew.

For four years I was gone in the Navy, and when I came back, I went to work for the Fireman's Fund. On one vacation to Laguna, we stopped in my favorite shop for a wedding present, and Mr. Warren said please, buy my store – but I didn't have the money, and I had just been promoted to a nice, new position.

Two or three months went by that I was working in downtown L.A., and it was no fun getting there. Over the weekend, I phoned Mr. Warren and asked if the offer was still open – he said, for

you, it is. It worked out for us to open there in January 1947. It seems like someone up there is looking out for me every day.

The most interesting phase of my life was when I was in the mid-East, with workshops in Bangkok, Saigon, Manila and Kyoto. I was on that circuit just about every year.

Q: Of all the places you've traveled, which is your favorite?

A: I've often been asked this, and I've answered evasively – **but Laguna Beach!** Where on earth – I've gone everywhere, and there's no comparison, when you put everything together that we have here.

Q: What does patriotism mean to you?

A: I think I'm a pretty good reflection of an American. I've served my family, served my country... Really in my heart, I haven't felt like I deserved it, but people get excited.

- **Committees Served by Harry:**
- Tax Payers of Laguna Beach since 1948
- American & Foreign Legion
- Art in Public Places
- Art Commission – Founded as Laguna Beach Cultural Commission
- Chamber of Commerce – President and Various Committees including founding the Chamber's Beautification Committee in 1952 which has completed more than 75 major projects to add to the beauty of Laguna.
- Coast Hwy Bypass Freeway
- Festival of Arts Board of Directors
- Festival of Arts Policy Committee
- Forest Eiler Larsen Lane
- Forest Avenue Adopt A Brick Campaign
- Holiday/Visitors Bureau Founder
- Historical Society
- Heisler Park Task Force (appointed by City)
- Palms for Main Beach Battle
- Main Beach Project Director/Dedication & Board Founder
- Main Beach Arts Use
- Laguna Art Museum Board of Directors
- Opera Festival History – today known as Opera Pacific
- Laguna Playhouse- Board President; Treasurer & Advisory Board; creating a new Playhouse
- Downtown Parking Development/Glenneyre Parking Structure
- Rotary Club Member & President; created sister club in Kamakura Japan
- Leisure World Club Founder
- South Coast Medical Center Founder/Fundraiser
- Civic League Association
- Civic Sign Ordinance Chairman