

A Local Reminder of Jonestown, 30 years Later

By Kimberly Gomez, Ledger Contributing Writer



Micheltorena Street homeowner Barry Isaacson with the found briefcase.

SILVER LAKE—When Barry Isaacson and his wife, Jenny bought their home on Micheltorena Street in 1993, they were told that the house had once belonged to Dr. Herbert Alexander, a former Los Angeles City College professor and his wife Frieda.

The mid-century modern architectural had recently been restored to its original grandeur, having fallen into serious disrepair after the Alexanders suffered the loss of their only daughter, Phyllis Chaikin; their son in law, Gene and two grandchildren in the 1978 Jonestown Guyana tragedy, the mass suicides and murders of 900 men, women, and children by the ingestion of potassium cyanide mixed with punch and in tranquilizers at the order of the Rev. Jim Jones, leader of the People's Temple.

Chillingly, the Isaacsons were told that a cache of letters between the Alexanders and their daughter may be hidden away on the property—left behind when the Alexanders moved to West Los Angeles.

Through the years, Isaacson had kept a half-hearted eye out for the described secreted treasure but was surprised in February when a handyman made a discovery in his home's crawl space.

"Part of me didn't want to intrude on this tragedy," said Isaacson. "Now I have to get into this since the handyman dug it up."

What Isaacson found was a vinyl hard-sided briefcase, its lock closures rusted through the years. Inside were letters, from Phyllis Chaikin and also some from the teen-aged Gail, who was 13 when

she perished. Countless newspaper and magazine clippings of the Nov. 18th event were also found.

One found letter was a copy from the Alexanders to their daughter. The letter was dated Sept. 21st, 1977 and signed "your mother and father."

"We have tried in every way to make an adjustment to an extremist radical movement that has swallowed you and your family... This adherence to a religious oriented radical movement which isolates your children... is not our conception of Socialism, Christianity and social reform," the letter read.

"I think the letters represent an important find," said Jonestown expert, Fielding McGehee, a journalist who oversees the Jonestown Institute and whose sisters and nephew died in the tragedy.

"It shows that the people on the outside were very concerned and frustrated and how that contributed to their own devastation."

In the 1970s, the local branch of the People's Temple was located at the corner of Hoover Street and Alvarado Terrace. At the time, it had more than 2,000 members recruited largely from the communities of Compton and Watts.

The Chaikins were members of the San Francisco Bay Area People's Temple and used to travel by bus caravan with Jim Jones for church-wide services in Los Angeles.

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The Chaikins were known to be part of Jim Jones' inner circle and instrumental in managing the Guyana settlement.

"Ostensibly, they were dedicated socialists that believed Jonestown was a utopian religious community and they were creating a socialist paradise on earth," said homeowner Isaacson.

In another letter, the Alexanders wrote: "We have at long last opened our hearts to you, expressing the sorrow and agony, which we have restrained over five long years. Any time you express the wish to resume normal relations and exchange with us, the past will be forgotten."

But letters from their daughter remained upbeat.

"Dear folks, have not

heard from you—mail to the interior is delayed, I wonder how you are doing..."

Her exchanges proudly describe her work in the medical facilities at Jon-

estown and are poetic in her description of her daily experience.

"The strength and principles you planted into me at an early age... are now flowering in fertile soil... I am thousands of miles from you, the electronic communications are limited between us but I am more your daughter than I've ever been before."

Seven months later, the



The briefcase was filled with letters and newspaper and magazine clippings on the mass suicide/murder.

Chaikins died in one of history's largest mass suicide/murders.

The letters have been donated to the Jonestown Institute and made available for further study at jonestown.sdsu.edu.

Isaacson, who is a feature film producer, would like to hear from anyone who knew the family by emailing him: barry90039@yahoo.com.