

Writing by Julia Halprin Jackson

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# The Women of the Olympic Project for Human Rights

By Julia Halprin Jackson



L-R: Sandra Edwards, Gayle Boze Knowles, Rochelle Duff Davis and Mary Noel at SJSU's 2016 commencement. Courtesy of Sandra Edwards.

Sandra Boze Edwards remembers feeling tear gas in the air during the Dow Chemical protest at San Jose State in 1967, weaving through demonstrators after class. It was only her second semester and protests against the Vietnam War and for racial justice and equal treatment of women were being staged on campus and across the country. Edwards had been exposed to the civil rights movement during her formative years in Los Angeles, in a home with politically conscious parents who had grown up in the South and migrated west when she was a child. Having watched the movement unfold across the country on the nightly six o'clock news, she

was no stranger to the impact of non-violent direct action as a means for addressing injustices and even changing laws.

In fall 1967, near the end of her second semester, the aspiring teacher personally experienced how hard it was for a person of color to find housing off campus. She'd go to apartment complexes with vacancy signs in their windows, only to be told that the rooms had already been rented. She says that the political atmosphere on campus and throughout the nation was charged and full of energy. The more she learned, the clearer it became that she needed to get involved.

“Word was out about the athletes who weren't able to get housing,” says Edwards, '70 Social Science, Teaching Credential, '88 MA Education Administration. “Growing up I had watched a lot of students who were participating in demonstrations in the South on TV—people I had admired. And here we had racial incidents on our own campus. I wanted to be a part of it.”

## A Movement Begins

She joined the United Black Students for Action, looking for ways to challenge housing discrimination, desegregate the Greek system and protest apartheid in South Africa—an issue that she and her father had often discussed. Edwards recruited her sister Gayle Boze Knowles and her high school friend Rochelle Duff Davis, '71 Social Science, to matriculate at San Jose State. Davis was there from the inception of the movement. When Knowles arrived, it was in full swing. She quickly understood the movement's immediacy and destiny, and was eager to participate. Her upbringing had, like her sister's, been steeped in African-American history and current events. Add to that her recent one-year service in VISTA and her extensive knowledge of black literature and poetry. She was fully prepared to support the Olympic Project for Human Rights, a movement to boycott the 1968 Mexico City Olympics that united athletes around civil

rights issues. Knowles, who went on to graduate from UC Irvine, is often credited with designing the OPHR poster that they distributed at track meets and around campus.

Mary East Noel also volunteered to support the cause. Noel, a teaching intern from San Francisco State, worked alongside Davis, Edwards and others with the College Commitment Program to recruit first-generation college students from underserved communities to San Jose State. Noel had relocated to California from Florida, where she had confronted the ugliness of the Jim Crow South firsthand—and was determined to change the status quo. Though not student-athletes themselves, Noel, Edwards, Davis and Knowles recognized the power of sport as a vehicle for demanding change—the tool they needed to shed light on social issues that went far beyond track and field.

“The Olympic Project for Human Rights was born out of the collaboration between two thoughtful, intellectual athletes,” Knowles recalls. “Ken Noel and Harry Edwards were recruited to San Jose State primarily for athletics. But they shared concerns about the poor conditions, specifically for black athletes at SJSU and black students in general. They saw how things had not changed much in their time at San Jose State, and they wanted to make it better for those who came after them, beginning with increased African-American access to San Jose State. And when enrolled, athlete or not, they wanted African-American students to be afforded the same dignity and support the white students were receiving.”

## Messages that Matter

“At the heart of really successful movements, I think there is a level of integrity and personal accountability. I think that’s how we find our way.” — Gayle Boze Knowles

By early 1968, in their own unique ways, Knowles, Noel, Davis and Edwards had become integral parts of the OPHR movement. They responded to requests, inquiries and responses from

athletes, journalists and academics—some positive, some frightening. Knowles remembers occasional phone calls in which unidentified callers shouted hateful messages before hanging up. She did not yet know that their small team would not only contribute to the movement, they would become educators themselves, carrying on the legacy of social justice throughout their personal and professional lives.

It took courage, commitment and focus on a bigger picture to take a stand for civil rights, to demand equal treatment and to simply exist as young black women in an era when even their hair was politicized. Throughout their college years, Edwards, Knowles and Noel recognized that they were treated differently, depending on how they did their hair. By embracing their natural hair, they were sending powerful visual messages of their own: We are beautiful and we are proud.

Mexico City, while a landmark moment for the OPHR, did not signify the end of the movement. Rather, it forced a public dialogue about sport and social activism, the civil rights movement at large and freedom of expression. While sociology lecturer Harry Edwards, '64 Sociology, '16 Honorary Doctorate, and graduate student Ken Noel, '66 BA, '68 MA, Sociology, strategized ways to organize student-athletes, Sandra Edwards and Davis participated in demonstrations on campus, passed out leaflets at track meets and worked in the OPHR office, managing correspondence, clipping news stories and answering their sole telephone.

When Tommie Smith and John Carlos made headlines in Mexico City, sparking international conversation and backlash, an entire community of OPHR supporters and volunteers in San Jose—many of them women—watched as the movement culminated in one iconic moment, two gloved fists raised on the Olympic podium in a human rights salute. For Edwards, the moment was both an ending and a beginning.

“It was absolutely perfect, knowing all too well the enormous pressure Tommie and John must have been under leading up to the Games, especially given their public support of the OPHR,” says Edwards. “Then they took the medal stand and we noticed the gloves and black socks. The music started, they bowed their heads and their fists came up. There they stood in this dignified stance. All of the work of so many culminated in that moment. Having witnessed what occurred on an international stage and knowing that I had contributed to that effort in some small way was extremely validating. It underscored for me at 20 years of age that you can make a difference.”

For Knowles, the moment extended the conversation that she and her friends were already having about visibility—and offered cues as to how they could multiply their impact back home.

“To me, the fist always said, ‘I’m here, I’m not going away,’” says Knowles. “We were nonviolent but we were not silent. That was the voice that comes from being seen. Nobody could dismiss or look away from the gesture. It spoke volumes. That voice said, ‘I’m here. I’m black. I’m proud. See me.’ All we were asking was to be acknowledged and recognized as human beings who deserve all the rights and privileges as every other being with white skin. Nothing has ever taken away from that loud shout that was heard around the world with that visual exclamation.”

## The Legacy Continues

Inspired by the impact they had helped make and motivated to create opportunities for the next generation, Davis, Edwards and Noel became teachers, principals and educational administrators. Knowles led a successful career as a technical writer before becoming a teacher herself. The OPHR had taught them that education was the key to empowering others—and that every child deserved a seat at the table, regardless of race, class or gender.

“All my life, I wanted to open doors for black students to get an education,” says Noel, ’99 MA Education, Educational Administration Credential. “I wanted to be someone who tells kids, ‘You can go to college.’ That’s still my mission today.”

Fifty years have passed since that iconic day in Mexico City. Noel, Knowles and Edwards recognize the sacrifices made by Linda Evans, Denise Pascal and Kim Carlos—then wives and partners of Olympians Lee Evans, Smith and Carlos—whose support contributed to the success of the OPHR. The medal stand salute communicated so much of what they were feeling—of what they were confronting—in San Jose, in their hometowns and in the communities where they worked.

Edwards, Noel and Knowles are mothers and grandmothers, friends who have shared many personal and professional milestones throughout the years. In their own ways, each of them has found ways to add the OPHR ethos to their lives. Noel serves on the Oak Grove School District school board. Knowles worked tirelessly to get out the vote for Barack Obama when she lived in New Mexico and championed the traditions and students she taught on the Navajo Reservation there. Upon retirement, Edwards became a court-appointed advocate for children in foster care, as well as an adjunct professor at Santa Clara University, where she taught educational equity and diversity classes for aspiring school administrators. She continues to be an active supporter of the Institute for the Study of Sport, Society and Social Change, San Jose State’s home for academics, students and sport sociologists. She has never forgotten the impact that a single moment can make—and the number of people working hard behind the scenes to create a movement.

# Throwing Convention: Margaret Jenkins, '25 Education

By Julia Halprin Jackson



Photo: Otto Brettmann/ Brettmann / Getty Images (Margaret Jenkins, '25 Education, threw discus at the 1928 and 1932 Olympic games)



Photo: San Jose Mercury News Historical Archive (Margaret Jenkins was the first woman from Santa Clara County to compete in the Olympic Games in 1928)

Margaret Jenkins stands on a track, her hair cropped above the ear. She wears a white V-neck t-shirt with diagonal stripes, laced shoes and—startlingly, to her peers—a pair of athletic shorts rolled halfway up her thighs. She is one of few women at the track. She lifts an 8'2" javelin over

her head and prepares for launch. In the moments before she releases, she spots the coach of an opposing team lurking nearby. She pauses, familiar with this mental game.

“Get out of the way or I’ll spear you to the ground,” she calls. The coach disappears. She regains composure, takes a deep breath and propels the javelin into the air, watching as it soars, free and clear, its path unobstructed, over the field.

Very rarely did anyone get in Jenkins’ way. The champion athlete and pioneer of track and field recalled this interaction years later, when reflecting on her ascent in sport. By all accounts, the woman could throw. Her 1919 Santa Clara High School yearbook, *The Tocsin*, described her as the baseball team’s catcher, the “most famous man at the bat.” Eight years later, when she came in third throwing discus during her tryout for the 1928 Olympics, the *San Jose Mercury Herald* commented that “she puts the her in hurl!” What did a woman with an impressive arm and indomitable grit do with her power in the early 20th century, when woman athletes were expected to wear blousy bloomers and avoid perspiring?

For Jenkins, the answer was straightforward: Focus on developing her own talent, seek mentors who believed in her and ignore the rest. Her career in sports started in fifth grade, when she discovered that she could throw farther than any of the boys on her school baseball team. In a 1984 interview with the *San Jose Mercury News*, she says that “it was considered unladylike, even a little bit brazen, to compete in athletics ... Reflecting on it, I guess I was a little bit courageous. I had to train in back alleys, away from everyone else. There were no woman coaches, so you had to find a male coach who would take you.”

Whether she was competing in basketball, baseball, tennis, hockey, volleyball, or—her specialty—javelin, shot put and discus events in track and field, Jenkins brought an energy and

determination to sport that set records in Santa Clara county, statewide and around the world. The 1925 San Jose Teachers College graduate pitched for her high school baseball team, which lost only one game, participated in two Olympic Games, collected more than 100 medals throughout her career and was inducted into three halls of fame before her death in 1996 at age 92.

During her junior year of college, she was approached by Laura Herron, the director of San Jose State's women's physical education department, to compete in a telegraphic meet. Telegraphic meets involved competing against off-site competitors and communicating scores via telegraph. She threw basketball, baseball and javelin, and despite accidentally grabbing the men's javelin, which was heavier, she came in second. Emboldened by her success that day on the track, Jenkins sought out the help of Stanford University's track and field coach, R.L. "Dink" Templeton, to help her master her technique. Though he was initially hesitant to take on a female athlete, Templeton ultimately agreed to coach her. In 1927, 1928, and 1929, she took three first-place national competition finishes in javelin throw, notably setting the world record for javelin throw of more than 129 feet in 1928.

When she learned that her preferred event would not be included in the 1928 Olympics, Jenkins asked Templeton to teach her the discus just eight weeks before the games began. That summer, she joined a team of 19 woman athletes—the first Olympic women's track and field team representing the United States—on the President Roosevelt ship, which took a week to sail across the Atlantic to Amsterdam. For Jenkins, sport provided entry to an international community and the world at large. Though she did not medal at the games, she did spend three weeks traveling solo across Europe with money she'd earned teaching. Jenkins juggled training for national and international competition with a 30-year teaching career in Santa Clara. She qualified for the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles, but she didn't medal.

She lived long enough to witness monumental change, both in athletics and in society as a whole. Born in 1903, just three years before San Francisco's infamous earthquake, she came of age just as women won the right to vote. She was a Navy officer in the Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service (WAVES) program during World War II, and spent every summer fly-fishing, either in the wilderness of Alaska or near her Lake Tahoe home. She never married and had no children—in itself a revolutionary act for a woman of her generation.

The decorated athlete spent her retirement fishing and invited the 1968 Olympic track and field team to train at her Lake Tahoe home to mimic the altitude of Mexico City. Notable SJSU alumni Tommie Smith, '69 Social Science, '05 Honorary Doctorate, and John Carlos, '05 Honorary Doctorate, were among the athletes who trained at Echo Summit just months before staging their historic moment for human rights on the Olympic podium. It seems fitting that the first woman in Santa Clara County to participate in the Olympics hosted the next generation of record-breakers, some of whom regarded sport as an opportunity to address civil rights on an international platform.

Years later, Jenkins reflected on the changes she'd witnessed throughout her career:

“How different now that women are accepted in the world of sports and competition. In days long gone by, you were frowned on if you took part in sports anything heavier than croquet ... In looking back at the curious notion that women should hold back female talent, it reflected a fear of change on the part of teachers who had been trained to accept traditional roles for women. Winning requires aggressiveness and a healthy dose of ego, expected of men, but unacceptable at that time in a woman.”

As one of the world's best female athletes, she didn't stop at confronting cultural stereotypes—as a physical education teacher, she played a role in changing the narrative about sports and gender. According to her, the key to succeeding in athletics had nothing to do with gender and

everything to do with “reliability and stability ... the difference between the star and the average person is because of interest and perseverance, good training and good living.”

Jenkins’ niece Margaret Swift recalled seeing her wear a bonnet to a 1984 Rotary Club event, remarking that “it was her way of demonstrating how she was a pioneer for women’s athletics—she was very proud of that.”

Jenkins died in 1996, the same year that 271 American women competed at the summer Olympics in Atlanta, Georgia. That year, Finnish athlete Heli Rantanen’s winning 222’ javelin throw outpaced Jenkins’ best by nearly 100 feet. Though progress in sport may be measured in inches or meters, Jenkins’ secret was to get “right in with life and [keep] going.” One foot in front of the other, one meet at a time, each day dawning new—that was how this pioneering Spartan created her legacy.

## The Bridge

### An excerpt of novel-in-stories *Foreigner*

It is the only footbridge in Fuengirola, a tiled walkway supported by two tall towers, suspension cables extending downward like spiderwebs. The bridge spans Arroyo Castillo, the town's sole creek that rarely waters the reeds along the bank. The bridge is all appearance, with little thought to function. This is the place they have come to bid farewell to Cat.

Cat has never needed a proper name; he isn't even technically their pet. He arrived on their doorstep five months before. He is an ugly old thing on the brink of his ninth life, his fur grey and falling out in spots, tail stuck at a permanent half-mast, the corner of one ear shorn clean off. But that is what Maisie likes about him: wherever he's been, whatever he's done, he's clearly participated. Even now, as he sways inside Kenny's burlap sack, weighted down with rocks, he meows with impressive strength. It is a mournful sound, the low moan of an animal that has given in but hasn't given up.

Maisie is 16, too young to have proper fun, but too old to understand languages innately, not like Kenny and Geoffrey, both of whom still have facile, bendable minds, minds that pick up handy phrases. The words she's learned are the words that boys hiss by her when she walks down the hall, the words that girls say so fast they nearly gun her down, *¿quétepasagui?* *Guiri* is a special brand of foreigner, the kind that sweep in along the southern coast and colonize it in an embarrassing hurry, as if they are not tourists so much as exiled convicts, property gurus in perpetual Hawaiian shirts. The tourist who can't take in an unwanted pet, because who knows when they might have to move next.

The worst part of it is, Maisie knows they're right. The Jones family isn't here because life is good. They came here because her dad had an affair with a man and because her uncle could open his bar without paying extra taxes. And now, here they are, Maisie and Geoffrey and Kenny and Uncle Pete and Mum, her hair bleached so many times that it has taken to falling out in fine strands all about the flat.

"Do you want me to do it?" Maisie asks. She nods toward the bag. They have reached the center point of the bridge, right where the creek meets the ocean. Here the meager trickle expands out into a series of overlapping rivulets until the water almost rushes.

Kenny doesn't say anything. For a moment she wonders if he heard a word she'd said. As much as she hates him sometimes, as annoying as he and his friends can be, hogging the television and kicking footballs off the patio, it doesn't seem right for this to be his job. Though none of this is really right: a year ago if you'd told her that in six short months they'd up and leave the country, give up their old flat in Bristol for the fifth-floor two-bedroom on the southern coast of Spain, she would have thought you were speaking another language. Spanish, perhaps. And here they'd finally made a friend—because that's what Cat was, really, he knew when to appear and when to disappear, when to purr and when to meow—and after he'd gotten injured and came mewling back time and again, whiskers brushed up against the sliding glass door, Mum had come home from a double shift at the Pig n' Whistle and said, That's it, Maisie, it's time to take care of it. The worst part was, Geoffrey thought she'd really meant it—that here they were, a family, adopting a pet, welcoming it to their new home—but Maisie knew better. Maisie knew that when it came time to taking care of things they could no longer afford, Mum meant something entirely different.

Mum hadn't minded Cat at first; in fact, it had been her idea to leave out a saucer of milk for him that first time, months ago, when the idea of Spain was still so new, when sharing a flat with three kids and her brother was the better of two options. Maisie can't look at Cat without thinking of that first afternoon they were all gathered on the tiny patio, the boys down on their hands and knees with the animal. Kenny would wake up early to eat his breakfast out there. They never did get any patio furniture, so he'd pull a cushion off the couch and kneel with his bowl of Weetabix in his hands, leaving the leftover milk on the cold ground for Cat to lick up.

But then one day Cat made the mistake of sneaking inside the flat. It was a Saturday and Mum had gotten up late after a long night at the pub. The boys were out on the patio when Mum slid open the door to grab her first cigarette of the day. Cat saw his opportunity and shot through her legs into the dining room, snaking under the sofa into the hallway. The boys thought it a great game; but it reminded Maisie of a different time, when their father would wander off for days, turning up after Mum had changed the locks. He'd stand on the stoop for hours, sometimes knocking, sometimes not. And on the occasion that Mum did let him in—he'd walk in the house and alter it in small and significant ways, burning meat on the stove, taking Kenny's drawings off the walls, rifling through Maisie's makeup drawer for lost change. The boys, they were too small to properly remember, but Maisie knew. She knew that once Cat came inside, things would be different.

They tried depositing Cat at the edge of town. They gave him to Geoffrey's friend Jesús, who lived on the other side of the freeway. They tried to give him away, but every time, Cat made his way back to Calle García Verdugo, Block 5, Floor 5, flat 3. It was as if he knew that they needed him, regardless of what Mum said. And you kind of had to admire him for that.

The three of them lean against the bridge's railing, watching the creek glisten below. The bag was Kenny's idea, a surprise, really, because Maisie didn't think twelve-year-olds were capable of thinking in such ways, but Kenny has been acting differently lately. She noticed that he wasn't showering every day; that sometimes he snuck out onto the patio before breakfast to just sit and stare, any view of the sunrise obscured by tower after tower of apartment complexes, stacked in rows down their block like Legos.

"Let's get this over with," he says, his arms straining with the weight of the sack, which twirls with Cat's efforts. "Geoff, why don't you wait for us on the other side?" Kenny looks to their youngest brother, seven years old and his eyes always wide, whether frightened or curious, sometimes Maisie can't tell.

"We'll come get you when we're done," Maisie says. "It'll only take a minute."

Geoffrey doesn't move and so she places her hands on his shoulders and turns him toward the shore. "Go on, now, and don't watch, please." He walks off slowly, turning around once to give them both a lingering glance.

Since moving to Spain, Maisie can't help noticing all the smells. In the springtime the air is floral; in winter the streets are sweet with oranges and avocados. The apartment block smells like deodorized floor wax and beans lightly simmering. The high school, which is by English standards a vocational school, the place students go when they know they won't get into uni, smells slightly of body odor, some spicy and undetected hormone. Cat had his own smell, too: the faint musty smell of an animal that has lived under bridges and in trees. A smell that lacked fear.

Kenny waits until Geoffrey crosses to the far bank before stepping back and inhaling deeply. "All right, here goes," he mutters, then winds up his pitching arm, making uneven

revolutions as the bag, full of rocks and Cat, gain flight. Cat's meows are insistent, powerful, even, his voice unexpectedly human, like he is performing an aria, and Kenny winces as the sounds grow louder. It is all so medieval.

But then an extraordinary thing happens: just as Kenny's arm makes a full revolution, there is an incredible ripping sound and by the time he lets the thing go over the railing, the bag is shorn clear in half. They hear the plop plop plop of the rocks hitting the water, watch as the brown burlap muddies the creek bottom, but Cat is gone. For a full minute Maisie and Kenny stare into the creek, searching for a snatch of gray fur. And then: the bridge begins to purr, a reverberation that starts small and gains momentum, to the point where Maisie can feel the very railing begin to vibrate. They turn around and there is Cat, licking himself, on the opposite side of the bridge.

Kenny's smile is a thing of wonder. Maisie has never seen him so relieved, his brows relaxed, dimples cutting grooves into his cheeks. Still the bridge seems to vibrate, the suspension cables taut.

"Hey Geoff! Come look!" Kenny says.

Geoffrey, who was turned away from the bridge with his hands over his ears, spins around and his face lights up at the sight. He runs across the platform, his shoes making hollow claps against the tile, and squats down next to Cat.

"C'mon, boys, let's go," Maisie says. "Before he follows us back."

"Gimme a minute," Kenny says, kneeling down to pet the cat. Cat hisses but settles into a small heap, allowing Kenny to run a feeble hand between his ears and down his spine.

Maisie edges to the far side of the bridge. She doesn't want to touch Cat again. She gives them another minute or two to sit with him before calling her brothers back from the bridge.