Joe Ortiz, co-owner of Gayle’s Bakery, began baking bread, built the business with wife Gayle, wrote several plays and now is painting.

Joe Ortiz has recipe for bread, life

Co-owner of Gayle’s Bakery reflects on past

EDITOR’S NOTE: This article is one of a series on happiness and well-being featuring Santa Cruz County residents, highlighting the guiding beliefs and philosophy as well as the challenges, achievements and struggles that have given meaning to their lives. If you know someone who fits the mold and should be featured, email dfuku@santacruzsentinel.com

By Andrew Lachman newsroom@santacruzsentinel.com

CAPITOLA → For Joe Ortiz who established Capitola’s renowned Gayle’s Bakery in 1978 with his wife, Gayle Ortiz, the craft of making an inspired loaf of bread and living a life of dignity and achievement are not dissimilar. Both are intense experiences guided by a respect for natural and ancient practices and require the willingness to innovate and to take risks.

At once mystical and practical, bread making and creating a satisfying life rely on self-reflection and the ability to reconsider one’s direction, said Ortiz. The key is to determine the basic proportions that result in a loaf that is “a crusty, flavorful bread with a chewy, voluptuous texture,” and to form a life that is enriching, honest and “gives something back to the community.”

The heart of bread baking is fermentation and the art of life is self-discovery that also cannot be rushed, said Ortiz, 68. He has been a professional guitar and bass player, a house painter for eight years, a law student for a year-and-a-half, and a short order cook for several years like his mother. A former waitress she owned a café near the Port of Los Angeles where she served up spaghetti and meatballs, hamburgers and French fries for longshoremen who worked on the nearby docks.

“Mom took pride in nourishing her customers,” Ortiz said. “Her soups were a belly wash that had curative powers.”

Ortiz’s father was a shoe maker. “Dad was a superb craftsman,” Ortiz said. “His instruments were his grinders and stitching machines and dyes. He could take a shoe with deep scratches and torn leather and restore it beyond what seemed possible.”

Yet his father also spent time betting on horse races and was often in debt. “Dad was usually just one step ahead of a bookie,” Ortiz said.

When Ortiz was 6 years old, his family had moved from a Long Island City housing project in New York in search of an idyllic southern California beach town with “50-foot palm trees and flamingo pink apartments.”

Although his parents divorced after nearly 30 years of marriage when Ortiz was 16 years old, his mother, “the savior of the family,” insisted that her two children remain close to their father.

“I never doubted that both my mom and dad were proud of me,” Ortiz said. “There was always love for my sister and me. Our parents never stopped trying to make our lives better.”

But they didn’t live long enough to see their son, a star baseball and basketball player at Stanford High School and a San Jose State graduate, become a leader of the artisan bread movement that champions the production of handmade loaves using sour dough, nutritionally superior flours, and no added eggs and shortening. Ortiz studied bread making in France, Italy, Germany and Spain and is the author of The Village Baker.

Ortiz’s mother was just 60 years old when she died from Alzheimer’s disease, and his father died from a heart attack when he was 63 years old before Ortiz could reconcile the father whose work ethic and compassion he loved with the father whose disturbing behavior he feared.

“He was charming and funny,” Ortiz said, “but an alcoholic and volatile when he drank too much.”

In Escaping Queens,” a musical in two acts previously performed at Cabrillo College, Ortiz explores his relationship with a father who knew the value and tranquility of commitment to wife and family but also sometimes rashly pursued pleasure and excitement.

About a year after writing a draft of the musical five years ago, Ortiz said he realized that he had suffered from child abuse and also that he was too caught up in his marriage and deeply angry about his father’s misbehavior. He felt compelled to deal with what his father in the musical refers to as “our family secrets.”

“How do we break out of the cycle of co-dependency and become whole and our own self?” Ortiz asked sitting in the enclosed patio at Gayle’s Bakery. “I don’t know how I put up with my parents’ dysfunctional marriage but I have now gone beyond it.” He said the passing of time, therapy and the writing and sharing of his musical has helped. “I have forgiven my father.”

Increasingly, Ortiz expresses himself through his landscape paintings and writing. “My art and work enable me to reveal my character,” said Ortiz, “and to live a creative and joyful life.”