Local educators and community organizers Jim and Merrie Williams not only witnessed the blossoming of the city of Santee, but also played instrumental roles themselves in its evolution. From rural, modest roots grew a close-knit, welcoming, and active public, which despite its location within one of the largest cities in our country maintains its small-town, first-name feel, because of people like the Williams.

When the pair arrived in Santee in 1968, recently engaged and searching for a place to begin their lives together, they faced common obstacles for people in that stage of life--a shortage of affordable housing, juggling school and work, but also another obstacle not entirely typical--a sow the size of their VW bug physically blocking their way on the street. Jim and Merrie waited patiently for it to cross, deciding then to plant roots in Santee. At the time, the city smelled of farm. The Wagon Wheel sat alone at the end of Mission Gorge, and along that now crowded street stood a lonely shopping center.

This did not deter the Williams. They enjoyed dinner at home--weekly groceries from Market Basket or Great Scott’s in Lakeside cost about $8--or parties with friends, saving money and focusing on school and work. There was of course the occasional Friday night dollar bowling, or trip to the Santee drive-in. Even during the social turbulence of the late sixties, while the Williams were aware of riots, walkouts and protests throughout the country and on the news, Santee stayed on an even keel. Soon, however, the pair would take part in the birth of a new kind of city, with the same kind of people.

Community involvement helped maintain Santee’s small-town feel during notable and rapid growth. Throughout their 50 years spent in the city, Merrie and Jim established and expanded multiple organizations that connected citizens of Santee and
inspired them to participate. Then and now people of Santee, the Williams especially, looked to their own community for entertainment, and built friendships along the way.

Merrie and Jim’s involvement in the Santee Community Theater colors their memories of our town. Through this program, they produced annual youth shows, in which children between four and eighteen performed. The plays centered at Cajon Park school, but after they finished, the crew packed up the sets, props, costumes and performers themselves and traveled from school to school, entertaining thousands of students and demonstrating how anyone who had the will to participate in theater could do so. The plays were free to join, and almost all of the performers were students from Santee.

In the same vein, a vibrant memory from Jim and Merrie’s Santee past is the parades. Merrie recalls crowds of people working on their floats late at night before the show, then getting to the site early in the morning next day, full of excitement. The parade went down Mission Gorge and continued up Mast, ending at Santee Lakes, where a party awaited with face painting and fun.

Christmas in Santee for the Williams would be incomplete without Santee Santa’s. Merrie remembers that in the seventies, the Boy Scouts had traditionally packed the food for the organization. However, the leaders realized that they had started to spend a lot more time playing with the food than packing it. As chairman of the Girl Scouts, Merrie was approached to take over, and from then on the club was an integral part of the season for their family.

Jim created his own tradition for Christmastime as well- he’d always had a hobby of decorating their home with Charles Dickens figurines for the season. With four weeks and over 400 buildings and characters, Jim brought a tiny Christmas Carol to life, inviting his students and parents each year to enjoy it.

Jim and Merrie raised a family of involved citizens as well- their children constantly performing in plays, playing in softball, soccer, basketball and gymnastic leagues. When they weren’t involved in an organization, they rode their bikes through the streets of Santee, to the theater or the roller rink, meeting friends and spending time outside together.

Jim spent over 40 years as an educator in Santee. He taught all three of his children, one of whom became a teacher in Santee himself. Jim often runs into past students in town, even multiple generations he has taught. He says that for him, and many others, teaching is not what he does. It is who he is. Jim and Merrie both share this dedication to the activities and occupations they’ve had in our city- diving in entirely to the work and play and in so doing cultivating the close-knit, involved and vibrant sense of togetherness that makes Santee special.