

# Suburban Life

Lorraine McClish editor/477-5450



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RANDY BORST/staff photographer

## Happy Holidays

The staff of the Farmington Observer gathered in the living room of the Grand River home of Walter Sundquist, a showplace of turn-of-the-century splendor in downtown Farmington, to

send season's greetings to our readers. We are (from left) Randy Borst, staff photographer; Casey Hans, staff writer; Joanne Mallazowski, staff writer; Bob Sklar, community editor; Rose

Butler, receptionist; Lorraine McClish, Suburban Life editor; Roy Meadows, classified account executive; Rhonda Rosser, retail account

executive; and Mike Cummings, area circulation manager. We wish you every happiness through the holidays and through the new year.

## Houses of candy

What started as a holiday tradition is now a hobby all year long

By Rebecca Haynes  
staff writer

WHAT STARTED AS A holiday tradition for Maggie Miller has become a year-round hobby that would make Hansel and Gretel shout with glee.

The Bloomfield Hills woman has dedicated a room in her home to her gingerbread houses, or candy houses, as she prefers to call them.

"I do mine just for fun," she said. "The real ones are made by true artists."

The hobby began 12 years ago while the Millers were living in Mexico.

"I wanted to show the children there something traditional from an American Christmas," she said. "You'd laugh at it now if you could see it."

The next Christmas there were three houses, and the year after Miller made a large castle and started landscaping a village. From there it blossomed.

"My friends started looking for things for me on their travels," she said, laughing. "They never want to ask where I put them. It's really funny to watch people come over because they all look very intently trying to see where I put their particular piece."

Maggie's husband Steve, chief financial officer for Chrysler and president of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra Hall, has helped with her hobby by constructing wooden tables with detachable legs to hold the large village. That way the table tops, and village, can be removed in large sections if necessary. He also set up electrical wiring underneath the table so that his wife need only

drill a hole through the table to hook up a new light.

AND LIGHTS are essential to the village. Miller has set up street lights, coach lights on buildings and lamps and chandeliers inside the various homes and shops, not to mention all of the lighted Christmas trees, decorated just like their larger counterparts.

Royal icing is used to hold the houses together, as well as for the snow in the village and on the building roofs. It's known for hardening like plaster and being airtight, and was first developed for use on Queen Victoria's wedding cake, hence the royal title, Miller said. Fifty years later the cake, which was coated in this icing, was opened, and still was as fresh as the day it was baked.

Miller said she learned the hard way that if she didn't use this type of icing, the gingerbread would soon become damp and fall apart.

Many of the ideas for the houses and the vignettes came from her three sons while they were growing up.

"One of the children, when he was about seven, decided we needed an outhouse," she said, laughing. "So we made an outhouse. But if you notice, all of its fixtures are porcelain."

"When a child gets interested you never say no," she said. "One of my son's friends had this idea for Godfrey (a dragon) and brought him to us. Well, I had no idea what to do with him, so I chained him to the castle."

The castle she referred to stands a couple of feet high and is complete with collector's miniature copies of the crown jewels.

MILLER FINDS many of her miniatures in Europe. More recent acquisitions are small glass figurines of orchestra members in black-tie,

each playing a different instrument. These she found in Venice and has placed under a gingerbread gazebo.

"My sense of design and color has gotten better," she said. "But all of this for me, is just sitting back and smiling. I think each person is a frustrated artist."

Miller said she makes three new houses every year. One goes to her housekeeper, another to her husband's secretary and the third to Leo Iacocca.

"I don't know what he (Iacocca) does with them, but I hope he enjoys them," she said. "My housekeeper's kids tried to eat the first one I gave her, but I tell everybody they're just to look at. I hate to think how long some of this candy has been around."

"I wish my technique were better but I don't beat myself over the head about it," she said, smiling. "I only had boys, you know, so this was my dollhouse."

*'My sense of design and color has gotten better. But all of this for me is just sitting back and smiling. I think each person is a frustrated artist.'*

— Maggie Miller



DAN DEAN/staff photographer

Maggie Miller demonstrates how she uses icing as her glue to build a gingerbread house for three-year-olds Koichi Chihara and Danny Dardian at First Impressions nursery school in West Bloomfield.



STEPHEN CASTRELL/staff photographer

Miller's gingerbread village contains outdoor vignettes as well as the traditional candy houses. She was especially impressed with the

craftsmanship on the part of the people who carved the fruits and vegetables seen in this outdoor market.