

CHAT ROOM



ELEANOR BLUM

New state leader has innovative ideas for schools

Tom Watkins is supercharged with lots of good, innovative ideas for education. When you are with him, the belief that he cares about each and every one of Michigan's children comes through clearly. He began his job April 30; however, speaking with him, one would think he had spent years as superintendent.

He gave me a booklet containing 30 ideas about education. It's dedicated to children and their teachers. He wants to reach out to all members of the community and hold monthly State Board of Education meetings across Michigan so they're accessible to all residents.

Personalized plates

Selling a Michigan license plate, with the proceeds going to education, is another of his ideas. Monies from Support Public Schools license plates would fund mini grants, up to \$1,000 for individual teachers to augment the cost of supplies and technology needed in the classroom. A great example of citizens helping students.

Getting seniors to serve as mentors and tutors in the schools is another idea. They could also help at home-work drop-in centers located within community service agencies. This would certainly be a bridge from one generation to another. Everyone would benefit with active involvement.

Robert Maxfield, superintendent of Farmington Schools, likes Watkins' willingness to take on tough issues. He believes the state superintendent is genuinely interested in restoring the state department of education to a place of importance.

Rebuilding

Maxfield is pleased that the recent accreditation plan that was based on the MEAP test will be tabled for now. Watkins believes that it's flawed and not worth renovating - it must be torn down and built anew. He said that accreditation was far too reliant on one test, the MEAP, which is as unacceptable as it is unlawful. The MEAP must be a part, but not the only part, of the new accreditation system.

Every child needs to stay in school until age 18, not 16 as it is today. So Watkins says let's repeal the state law and lift the cap from 16 to 18 or until a high school diploma or GED is earned. Most people populating our prisons are illiterate. Michigan needs a Get Educated Today program. State superintendent Watkins hopes to work with retailers to have flags and signs in stores promoting the GET program.

Public education needs to become the movement, not the establishment. There is nothing wrong with education that it can't be fixed by education. State superintendent Thomas Watkins is a dynamo of ideas and energy. He promises to shake up the status quo in Michigan education.

Eleanor Blum is a school teacher in Detroit and a resident of Farmington Hills. Leave her a message at (248) 651-9665.

Sunday in the Park with the family offers fun

Hayrides, a marine safari, a moonwalk for bouncers and a reptile show are just some of the highlights of the annual Free Family Day at Heritage Park, scheduled from noon to 3 p.m. this Sunday, Aug. 5.

The group MB2 will take the stage at 2 p.m. with songs from 'NSync, Backstreet Boys, Ricky Martin, Michael Jackson and more.

Heritage Park is located between 10 and 11 Mile roads on the west side of Farmington Road. The event will be held in the north shelter.

Miss Congeniality

She keeps Farmington pageant humming along

BY MARY RODRIQUE
STAFF WRITER
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With the Miss Farmington/Oakland County pageant behind her, one would expect program Executive Director Ginny Morris to have some down time. One would be incorrect.

"There isn't a day I don't do something pertaining to Miss Farmington or Miss Michigan - filing phone calls, appearances," said Morris, who has been running the show since Julie Dugan was crowned in 1993.

Just since the July 18 pageant, Morris has presided over the contestants involvement with the Founders Festival parade and Elks Club pancake breakfast. She and pageant board members, Alice Taroyan and Todd Lipa, attended the Miss Bay City pageant where a former Miss Farmington, Leslie Reinhold, was competing.

And she's getting newly crowned Miss Farmington Tracey Finlayson and her court ready for the annual Family Day at Heritage Park Sunday, Aug. 5.

Morris gets no salary for her job as executive director. It's strictly a volunteer position.

"I do it for these," she said, clutching a fist full of heartfelt thank-you notes from the current crop of contestants. Many of the contestants go through the process several times since the age range goes from 17 to 23.

Contest rules are broad. The Farmington pageant is open to young women who live, work or go to school in Oakland County. Similar contests are equally broad, so many girls compete in several contests.

"You prepare them and they go on to win other pageants," she said. At the Miss Michigan pageant in Muskegon last June, Morris cheered not only for Miss Farmington 2000 Angela Corsi but Leslie Reinhold (who wore the crown in 1999) and Madonna Emond, a former Miss Farmington runner-up. Later this month she'll attend the Miss Redford contest to cheer on Brooke Brennan, first runner-up in the Miss Farmington pageant.

Audrie Chernauckas, Miss Farmington 1995, later went on to represent Redford in the Miss Michigan pageant, where she took the state title. Though she lives and breathes the Miss America Scholarship Pageant program, Morris didn't follow her protégé to Atlantic City's famed Miss America stage.

"It was Josh's first birthday," said Morris, of her now 3-year-old grandson, who is also a popular fixture on the Miss Farmington pageant stage. "But the next time one of my girls wins, I'll be there."



Enthusiastic: Ginny Morris, longtime executive director of the Miss Farmington/Oakland County pageant, talks about her commitment to the pageant organization.

be there."

Pageant board president Todd Lipa has known Morris for nine years.

Tireless service

"She is definitely a dedicated volunteer who puts enormous hours into helping young ladies. She is a person who works well with kids and young ladies and she is well known in the pageant world," said Lipa, who is also Farmington Hills director of youth and family services.

Alice Taroyan, chairwoman of the pageant judges, describes Morris as "selfless, loving, caring and a tireless worker who goes 24/7 for the girls. Her door is never locked."

Taroyan credits Morris' work with helping establish the pageant as "a very stable event with a proud name. Our pageant is a known commodity and in addition to being a good program and a nice service for the community, it has opened a lot of doors for the girls."

Erin Cogswell, Miss Farmington 1998, got her job at WDIV-TV through her pageant involvement.

"She met (newscaster) Harry Hairston at the Chili Cook-off and got an internship," Morris explained.

Cogswell is now a behind-the-scenes staffer at the Detroit-based station. She emceed the pageant this year with Reynolds Wolf, channel 4 weatherman.

Morris grew up in rural Pennsylvania, on a 196-acre farm near Erie. She moved with her husband and two daughters first to Royal Oak and later to Farmington Hills when daughter Karen, now 30, was a junior in high school. Daughter Kim, 33, is the mother of Josh. Morris, now divorced, says she immediately felt welcome in Farmington because it reminded her of the community where she grew up.

"Everybody was so involved with everything," she said. "My parents were involved with scouting and 4-H (club). Our house was a meeting place.

My house is like that now. The girls don't need to knock."

Tapped for post

The Miss Michigan pageant committee has come courting Morris, who has become a fixture on the state pageant system, which boasts 28 local contests. But she says she'll stay right here.

During her tenure, she moved the show downtown - from Vladimir's Banquet Hall to the city-owned Civic. She's had everyone from Special Olympians, to the U.S. Marines to Farmington Hills firefighters act as ushers. One year Pamela Eldred, Miss America 1969, emceed the show. And more than once she booked audience favorite Kelly Garver, twice a Miss Farmington and a runner up to Miss America in 1986, to play her electric fiddle.

"The girls keep me young," she said. "They grow, they find themselves. I will be involved with the program in one way or another because I believe in it very much."

Duck derby makes splash for cancer research

BY MARY RODRIQUE
STAFF WRITER

It started when Randi Simko of Farmington Hills took a trip to Israel a few years ago.

Joining other Hadassah members

Simko felt compelled to learn more. "You get obsessed. She talked me into it."

Simko came home to the Greater Detroit Chapter of Hadassah in West Bloomfield and petitioned the executive board to make a duck derby a commu-

nity-wide fund-raising event. It's harder today with everyone working outside the home."

As a member of Hadassah's National Young Leaders Advisory Council, Simko needed to do a community project to fulfill one of her requirements.

of Novi and Andrea Chanes of West Bloomfield believe this year's event will be bigger and better.

For one thing, there's more corporate sponsorship, which means more proceeds will benefit the cause - children's cancer research. Co-sponsors include MetroParent magazine, WJR, the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers and the Detroit Jewish News.

Families can enjoy hours of festivities at Maple Beach. From 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., there will be moonwalks, a magician, face painting, airbrush tattoos, carnival rides and games. The only cost will be for food and beverage concessions, and 10 percent of those proceeds will be donated to the derby. The race begins at 2 p.m.

"It's really a family event," said Simko, who earned Hadassah's Judith Epstein Award last year for her successful Ducky Derby, which raised \$10,000. This year the committee hopes to raise at least \$30,000.

"There were a lot of start-up costs last year and we had to pay for some of the prizes," said Phillips. "This year, it's all donations. And sales are going well."

The cute yellow rubber ducks can be purchased for \$5 apiece. There are packages available for sale, such as a flock of 30 for \$100 or a derby dozen for \$50. On race day, the ducks, all encoded with a registration number, are placed on shore at water's edge and bob along the water to the finish line, where they are ensnared in a trap. There are several prizes.

The grand prize is a week for two in Cabo San Lucas including airfare, courtesy of an anonymous donor. The Franklin Racquet Club is donating the first prize, a one-year family tennis membership. Second prize is a weekend getaway for two, courtesy of Hotel Baromette and the Novi Chop House. Third prize is a pair of white gold and diamond earrings donated by Astrelin's Fine Jewelry.

There are several other prizes.

Please See DUCK DERBY, C7



Rubber ducks: Detroit Ducky Derby co-chairs, (from left to right) Randi Simko, Julie Phillips and Andrea Chanes.

from across the USA, Simko hooked up with a woman from southern California who was chairing a rubber duck race fund-raiser in her hometown.

"That's all I heard about for a week," said Simko. "She was selling ducks on Maasada (an ancient Jewish fortress near the Dead Sea)."

nity-wide fund-raising event.

Hadassah is a women's Zionist and volunteer organization with over 300,000 members worldwide. The Detroit chapter has 5,000 members.

"It would be a way to get notoriety for the group and raise money for projects in Israel," Simko said. "We need

Thus she became the first chairperson of what has become known as the annual Detroit Ducky Derby.

It debuted last August at Kensington Metropark's Maple Beach in Milford.

The second Ducky Derby is slated for the same location on Sunday, Aug. 26. Simko and 2001 co-chairs Julie Phillips