



Call her Question Master

Just call me Question Master. I have the blue ribbon with the silver-glittered letters Q, M, to prove it. As someone who asks a lot of questions locally, I had a chance to fill a different role Jan. 21 in the Reader's Digest National Word Power Challenge state championship event for Michigan at Lawrence Technological University in Southfield.

It was a commitment I made last year to officials from Women in Need of Guidance and Skills (WINGS). The event was bigger than I expected. Reporters in large communities like the Farmington area meet many people throughout the year. Last year, a group of women which included Joyce Snodgrass, a Farmington Hills resident, who are dedicated to improving literacy and job skills for women, came to our newspaper office.

It was clear this group wasn't about to let any woman fall or fall through the cracks.

After the article ran, Snodgrass came totting a camera and while handling me a WINGS T-shirt and expressing her gratitude, laughed, snapped a quick photo and said all their members would soon read about the article in their newsletter.

Then last fall, Snodgrass called again asking me to serve as a judge in the Reader's Digest competition. Her WINGS colleagues were still abuzz about being chosen as state coordinators for the event.

I thought I was volunteering for something like a spelling bee. These WINGS women are masters of understatement.

A series of e-mails followed and then one last week stunned me. Al Roker from the Today Show was sending his film crew to tape the Michigan competition for NBC. Michigan was the only state to receive this honor, according to Sheryl Simmons, WINGS executive director.

Wow.

"How did you get involved in this?" asked my husband, John.

"Simply and quietly while doing other things," I replied.

ONTO THE COMPETITION

I led two preliminary competitions with a dozen students each while others timed the responses and kept score.

The Reader's Digest National Word Power Challenge is a vocabulary contest designed to help fourth- through eighth-grade students learn in a fun and challenging environment.

Simultaneously across the nation, 100 students in each of the 50 states competed for the opportunity to be the one student who progresses to the National Championship Event, which will be held March 24-26 at colonial Williamsburg, Va.

Roker will serve as "Question Master" for the national event.

Anyre Makupson, formerly of UPN Channel 50, served as Question Master for the final round in the Michigan competition.

Students from as far away as Negaunee showed their vocabulary skills. The program also featured a flag ceremony with Junior Girl

Designer's life tied with downtown's Village Mall for 28 years

BY JULIE NORRICKS IGRIGG
CORRESPONDENT

The heart of downtown Farmington is dominated by the Village Mall, a building whose proud walls and columns are steeped in history and tradition. And quietly in the background, you'll find Mary Howard Stolberg, a woman whose life has been entwined with the Mall's for the last 28 years.

The Village Mall building was constructed in 1921 by the Warner family to house the Farmington State Bank. The National Bank of Detroit came along in the mid-1950s and bought the bank portion of the building, although not the adjoining stores.

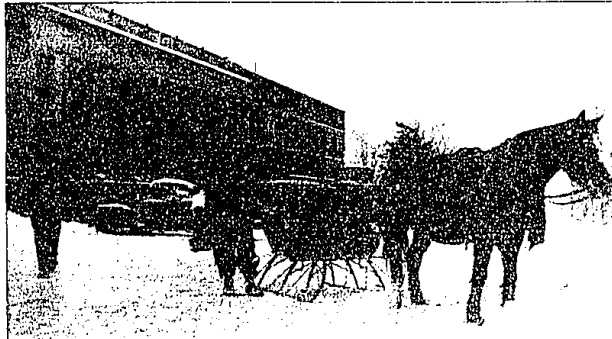
Later, in the 1970s, the Warner family purchased the bank building back to create the Village Mall as it's known today.

"The Village Mall is the essence of small-town entrepreneurship," said Dave Cornwell, the managing partner for the Village Mall.

PEOPLE FIRST

But while bricks and mortar may be fascinating on their own, one simply can't separate them from the people who have shaped their history. Stolberg, a state- and board-certified designer, opened her interior design business in the Village Mall in 1975. From her studio, which is nestled in what was once the Farmington State Bank president's office, Stolberg used her appreciation and eye for beauty to brighten people's lives by simply redecorating their homes.

It all started with a powder room. Stolberg remembers her first commission with a



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smile, and she speaks of water closets and lavatories with a charming quirkiness that makes talk of toilets and sinks seem almost vulgar.

Her bathroom makeover obviously impressed her first clients: Stolberg has now designed rooms for three generations of the same family.

"It's lovely knowing that you've helped people by making their environments better," Stolberg said.

Over the years, Stolberg moved on to bigger projects — ones that many people may recognize without realizing her connection to them: Both the Warner Museum and the exterior of the Farmington Observer office have benefited from Stolberg's sense of style.

Her biggest project, and definitely the most visible, is the fresh new exterior on the Village Mall.

"I decided to change the color of the building, but I had no idea to what," Cornwell said. So he asked Stolberg: "I give her total credit for the selection."

It wasn't an easy decision for her, Stolberg remembers. "I'm such a

perfectionist that I spent about a month thinking of every possible color." She knew she wanted a lighter, more cheerful color that would enhance the neo-classical architecture without straying too far from the confidence I have in Mary. I'm afraid I wouldn't have had the courage to make such a dramatic change."

Stolberg's passion for beauty hasn't diminished since she came to Farmington about 50 years ago. Now 72, she visits her studio three to four days a week rather than the six she used to devote. Rheumatoid arthritis affects her movement, but she doesn't let it stop her. "I didn't choose the body, but it hasn't affected what really matters: my mind and heart," Stolberg said.

"She works with it," said Stolberg's daughter, Ann. "She has one of the most joyful spirits."

Architectural Digest magazine sought out Stolberg to be part of a feature on Michigan designers. Her reputation was no secret, it would seem. Stolberg, who was surprised at the honor, says the magazine chose her because they



Stolberg

had heard she hadn't received a single complaint from a client in more than 20 years of business.

While it's challenging to coax Stolberg out of her quiet reserve enough to share stories about her own life, the same isn't true when speaking about her children. "I don't think there's anything more important than your children," she said. "I'm so proud of what they do."

The feelings must be reciprocal. Stolberg's three daughters — Ann, Mary Margaret and Barbara — and her sister Julia, also designers, help out at the studio, though Ann says Stolberg's involvement remains constant. "She has her hand on everything that comes in or out."

Those who have known her and worked with her are quick to point out how remarkable Stolberg is.

"She's an institution in Farmington," Cornwell said. "I can't say enough about her."

As for her impact on the community, the bright storefronts on Farmington Road and Grand River are only visible reminders of the lives she has touched.

Her decision was practically made for her by a sign from heaven.

Stolberg says her son, Donald, was walking near his office in Detroit when he heard something fall from the Ford Building. He discovered a palm-sized chunk of the creamy limestone exterior of the building laying on the sidewalk. Donald picked it up and brought it to his mother. "The minute I saw it, I had a sense that that was the color," Stolberg said.

She picked four complementary shades, which she calls historical American colors, to

A SIGN

accent the individual storefronts of the Mall. And with a touch of gold leaf added to the topmost point of the front of the building, the Village Mall had its new face.

Cornwell is thrilled. "I can only say, were it not for the confidence I have in Mary, I'm afraid I wouldn't have had the courage to make such a dramatic change."

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A dated photograph of the exterior of the Village Mall shows how its many unique features have stood the test of time. A recent makeover of a creamy limestone finish with four complementary shades gives the Village Mall a fresh look today.

Baby Studio fills void for parents

BY SUE BUCK
STAFF WRITER

Shoppers looking to indulge their favorite child with clothing, gifts and accessories will have a difficult time choosing at The Baby Studio.

"This is a great area with a lot of marketing potential," said Julie Grippo, a Farmington resident and new owner of the store.

The business is located in The Village Mall at Grand River and Farmington Roads.

"Especially with Jacobson's being closed, people come in and say they have nowhere else to go," Grippo said. "This is a way to fill that void. There aren't many places any more to buy things."

Grippo frequents shows in Los Angeles, Chicago and New York. She reads magazines



Julie Grippo owns The Baby Studio in the Village Mall.

and does online research.

Previously she was a research managing consultant for the Gallup organization.

"For me it was time to have a change in careers," Grippo said. "This is challenging but fun."

Grippo carries children's clothing and unique gifts, girls' clothing to size 14 and boys clothing to size 7, christening gowns and

with matching hat as a \$180 Victoria Kids dress or clothing hand-painted in Africa.

The store stocks purses, slippers and puppets, keepsake gifts, jars/containers for the first lock of a child's hair, tooth fairy pillows and boo boo bunnies to put in the freezer to help with boo boos.

Grippo also offers a gift registry.

"I carry a lot of different blankets because nice blankets are hard to find," Grippo said. "I carry a lot of European and USA brands. I don't want to be a Babies R Us line."

An extra advantage for Grippo is planning the wardrobe for her own children.

Julie and her husband Dan have two children, Sam and Dec.

They are as likely to find a \$34 sundress



Julie Grippo is pleased to serve her customers.