

# SUBURBAN LIFE

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ROSALIE DEGREGORIO

## Center has lot to offer

I just realized it will be two years since I left the position of executive director of a crisis center and it's almost two years that I've been executive director of the Community Center of Farmington, Farmington Hills at the Long Acre house.

Since my interview for this position, and each day that I turn into the grounds of the community center I still get that sense of serenity and a wonderfully warm feeling from this magnificent house and grounds.

At first I loved the center for its ambience, and as time went by for its historical value. The house is 124 years old. The center is entering its 25th year.

Most of the people who had lived here 25 years ago or more were involved with the beginnings of center, many of them have retired and moved on, leaving the care of Farmington, Farmington Hills and the roots of these two communities to the "newer" families.

Are we willing to give way to what is called progress to the developers who rush in, make their mark and leave? Are the children of Farmington, Farmington Hills growing up with a sense of pride and responsibility toward their community and its historic value? I often ask these questions because I am concerned for the future of the center.

Young adults whose parents were married at the center and former students are returning here to their roots - to hold their receptions and ceremonies here because of the ambience and history.

I have seen mostly the same faces for the past two years. It may be because people are not that aware of the center and what we have to offer. Deep down, I know that if people were more aware of the center they would want to become a part of this atmosphere, either as individuals or as families.

So, briefly, I'll tell you. We are a nonprofit, service organization that survives with funding provided by your attendance at our special events and fund-raisers, by your registering for classes and by your renting the house and grounds for a single room for your memorable event, meetings or seminars and by you contributing during our annual fund drive.

We do not receive money from any city, state or federal government. We are proud of the center; in the last year, a lot has been accomplished. We have increased and diversified our fine and performing arts classes and are working to improve our cultural mission.

I invite you to stop in to see the completed commercial kitchen, the interior painting and the rejuvenated wood floors. Meet our new staff and take a historical tour of the house and grounds. See what we have done without our tax dollars and with a part-time staff and volunteers who provide full-time services to accomplish a demanding, quality service.

Visit the 2nd Edition, this quaint store is staffed by the Volunteer Guild, which offers a selection of quality clothes. Would you like your wedding party to be memorable? We can provide you with the perfect setting for just about any occasion.

The five-acre natural woodsy setting is a perfect place for busy meetings and training sessions. Recently, a business group during their lunch break took a walk in the misty rain through the grounds and the next thing I knew the businessmen were playing football. Fun and laughter is provided, too.

The center also offers performing and fine art classes, summer camps and social gatherings. We sponsor clubs that you may be interested, too, like a women's club, men's club, garden club and the Volunteer Guild.

I could go on about what we offer. However, to really find out, you'll just have to come and spend some time here. Also, remember to pick up our brochure at the beginning of each season, September, December and April to be informed of our events, camps and classes.

Many of our past financial supporters have been quite generous, but unfortunately, some have moved on. We must find new supporters in order to continue to provide you with quality classes and services. We have an injured old boiler heading for termination. This could seriously damage this lovely building. If you haven't made your tax-deductible contribution yet, please do. A new furnace certainly would make us all feel safer.

Volunteer! Join our guild. They alternate their meetings evenings and late mornings to accommodate all schedules. Active business people are needed on the board of directors. We could use your leadership abilities.

Come join the center. There are many choices and I am sure you can find your niche and become a participant in the community through the Community Center.

Rosalie Degregorio is executive director of the Community Center, Farmington, Farmington Hills. She lives in Farmington Hills.



## 'Twas the night

Dinghy Sharp sure knows how to tell a story. With keen memory and hand gestures as varied as the stories she tells, Sharp spins a Christmas tale with a surprise ending.

BY SUE MASON  
STAFF WRITER



There are different ways of experiencing a story. You can write the story; you can read the story; or you can tell the story. For Florence Dinghy Sharp, telling the story is the favored course. A long-time member of the Detroit Storytellers League, Sharp has a way with stories that leaves an audience hanging on her every word.

With hand gestures, facial expressions and voice inflections, she makes even putting on a microphone sound interesting - "Getting wired is difficult; I feel like an astronaut on a tether."

The main "dessert" for the last of the three fall luncheons sponsored by Schoolcraft College's Women's Resource Center, Sharp left participants with holiday cheer as she recalled a childhood story and some of the history of our very American Santa Claus.

A former Farmington special education teacher who has been recognized as a pioneer in remedial education, Sharp works as a consultant with school systems across the country and as a speaker for educational groups. She also performs storytelling programs for organizations and schools as well as libraries and hospitals.

She offers a wealth of knowledge about the jolly old elf. She quickly tells of his evolution from the European St. Nicholas to a Santa Claus who lives at the North Pole, has elves help make toys, and travels with reindeer. The talk is interspersed with explanations of Victorian customs.

"Thomas Nast put Santa Claus at the North Pole and had the elves help make the toys, but Mrs. Claus didn't come along until 1927," Sharp said. "The reindeer came from Washington Irving."



Magical: Using her voice, facial expressions and hand gestures, Dinghy Sharp casts a Christmas spell over her audience.

Nast was a 19th century political cartoonist and illustrator who spent 44 years entertaining people with his work. His version of Santa Claus debuted in 1868. The original of the highly recognizable lithograph that shows Santa with a clay pipe and holly wreath is at Greenfield Village in Dearborn, according to Sharp.

Deep interest Her interest in Santa includes 167 versions - old and new - of Clement Moore's "A Visit From St. Nick," better known as "The Night Before Christmas." And her story repertoire includes a Cajun version of the poem that has Santa alighting a skiff and being pulled by eight tiny alligators.

But interesting tidbits aside, it was the story with its surprise ending that kept the audience transfixed. It comes from Sharp's childhood, from her grandfather who lived in Maryland. Normally, the family didn't visit at Christmas because of the weather, but one year they did visit, much to the delight of her grandfather.

"Grandpa was excited because he never got to really share Christmas with us," she said. "He said, 'There's a story I want to share with you that I've wanted to share since you were born, but couldn't. It was told to me by my grandfather.'"

The story centered on Christmas Eve in 1822 and Sharp's great-great-grandfather, whom the family called Papa. The family lived on a six-acre estate in New York; Papa was a professor of Greek, Latin and Hebrew at what was then Columbia College in New York City.

Papa had figured he had done all of his chores for the holiday, including making a new

vox candle, when Mama reminded him still had to go to town to get the Christmas goose and make up a story for their oldest daughter, who was seriously ill with tuberculosis, Sharp said.

Papa hitched up the team of horses to the sleigh to head to town. It was snowing so heavily that he couldn't see, but he knew the horses would get him there like they did every day.

"The snow was so heavy and so wet, he couldn't see, but then a miracle happened," Sharp said. "Like turning the handle on a pump, the snow stopped and the wind blew down the Hudson River, freezing it into icicles. The moon came out and it looked like a dream."

Among the things Papa saw was Peter, the town handyman, with his big, round tummy and flowing beard and wearing a red parka.

"The children would tease him, wanting to know if he tucked his beard in his nightgown to sleep," Sharp recalled. "He was always telling the children stories of his homeland, Denmark, especially about St. Nicholas. He told wonderful folk tales about his homeland, and the children were always anxious to hear them, especially at Christmas."

Peter would chop wood and deliver it to the homes in town. On Christmas Eve, he was busy "giving the only gift he could afford, the gift of his labor. He was leaving wood at every home so no one would be cold for Christmas," Sharp explained.

Papa's story Papa got the goose and headed home. The children were busy getting ready for bed. They washed in a pan of soapy water water Mama

See CHRISTMAS, 2C

## Happy Holidays

From us to you: As the Farmington Observer staff looks forward to a new year, we wish everyone happy holidays. Staff members include: photographer Sharon LeMieux; sports editor Dan O'Meara; temporary reporter Sue Buck; editor Tom Baer; sales representatives Melissa Matthews and Roy Meadows; copy editor Beth Sundra; receptionist Rose Butler; staff reporter Bill Coutant; temporary reporter Diane Gale; and staff reporter Larry O'Connor.

