

June 2008

WILLIAMSBURG'S

# Next Door Neighbors

VOL.2, ISSUE 6

PRICELESS

Discovering the people who call Williamsburg home

## Women Making a Difference

Three of last year's Honorees remember...

*Women with a Cause*



MARY BREWER  
HEALTH CARE FOR SENIORS



SUZI WILLIAMSON  
THE HAT TRADER



DEBBIE SMITH  
H-E-A-R-T FOUNDATION

**More Women Making a Difference**  
Melissa Cantrell, Sharron Cornelius,  
Marilyn Taylor, Liz Moore, Clemenza Braxton

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Meredith Collins, Publisher

I like this issue of *Next Door Neighbors* about Women Making a Difference because I think it is a reminder for all of us that we can and should be doing something in our lives to make a difference in someone else’s. It is the small things we can do everyday in our interactions with others that add up to something really big.

Speaking of big, our cover story is very impactful again this year since it is about *Women with a Cause*, a second year event that recognizes women in our community and the causes they are devoted to. I have selected this story again not only because the event was successful last year in recognizing local women for their charitable achievements, but also because it brings some attention to their causes. I also like this story because the women nominated for this recognition are not necessarily high profile individuals who have been successful gaining recognition for their causes on their own. Instead, these women are nominated by their peers - friends, family or co-workers - who see first-hand what these women are doing on a daily basis and who recommend them for consideration for this *Women with a Cause* honor because they truly appreciate what they do and want others to know about them and the organizations they are passionate about.

We have also included several other stories about women who are doing great things for our community who may not be a part of *Women with a Cause*. We know that it would be impossible to tell the stories of every woman in our area that is doing something to make a difference in the lives of others. So instead, we give you the few stories that we do have space for and we hope that they will inspire each of you to do even more. NDN

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**Monica Sigmon**

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# Monica Sigmon's



## Celebrating Women Making a Difference in Our Community

By Joe Collins

On a mild spring evening in May of last year, the moon and stars seemed to conspire and shine particularly bright in one little corner of Williamsburg where the impressive TowneBank building sits at the entrance to the community of NewTown. The air was charged with excitement and anticipation; beams from softly lit floodlights were teased and twisted to spell out the logo of *Women with a Cause* across the front portico where guests poured into the lobby of the building affectionately and appropriately known to insiders as the “Taj-Mahbank”.

The brilliance of the stars outside that night paled in comparison to the stars that were aligned inside: 35 local women with amazing energy and heartfelt charitable causes. These women were the nominees for the first annual *Women with a Cause* celebration and by the end of the evening six of these women would be the first official honorees.

Anyone attending the celebration and listening to the stories of these exceptional women and their exceptional accomplishments could not help but be inspired. The event had an impact on the honorees and, as intended, their causes as well.

As we approach the date of the second *Women with a Cause* celebration we caught up with three of the honorees from last year to get an update on their causes and to find out what last year's honor meant to them:

### Suzi Williamson

Suzi was honored for her work in establishing “The Hat Trader”, an organization that collects and redistributes hats, wigs, and other accessories to women who are experiencing chemo-induced hair loss.

It was eleven years ago when Suzi learned that she had breast cancer and while undergoing chemotherapy lost her hair. “It was a traumatic thing for me,” Suzi recalls. “It was the only time I cried during the whole experience.”

Once she was finished with her treatments and her hair was coming back, Suzi was looking forward to saying “good riddance” to all of the hats and wigs she had accumulated and no longer wanted.

However, sensing that there were a lot of women facing chemo-induced hair loss who could make good use of them she took her idea to a support group she belonged to, Williamsburg Women for Breast Cancer Support (no longer in operation) and to her hair salon, Lissa and Company. They enthusiastically supported the idea of making the hats available to others undergoing chemotherapy and began collecting donations.

The word spread and soon the United Way and the American Cancer Society officially endorsed Suzi as “The Hat Trader” and pitched in to help promote the charity and collect donations.

It would be fortunate if the charities supported by these women could be eliminated by breakthrough cures or other miracles, but that is not the case. “Recently I had six people in one week come to me for head coverings which is unusual, six in one week,” Suzi says. “Three of those women were young women with breast cancer who had young children.”

A year after being singled out, Suzi, like her co-nominees, is still a woman with a cause

and is still working hard to make a difference here in Williamsburg. Something as simple as the gift of a hat has warmed not only the heads of area cancer victims, but their hearts as well.

### Mary Brewer

Mary was honored last year for her work in helping senior citizens, their families, and their medical providers develop long term care plans that centered on the patient's wishes. She has been working in medical social work for many years starting in the Acute Care Unit at Williamsburg Community Hospital when she first moved here. After working there in health care planning and management long enough to retire she accepted a position at Patriot's Colony.

Mary provides one-on-one consulting for senior citizens who are transitioning from one level of care to another.

“I've been very fortunate that I've worked in the health care community for over 30 years,” Mary beams. “I've been able to have influence on a lot of people's lives. The main thing is to not only provide age management for older people but also provide some dignity and choice and



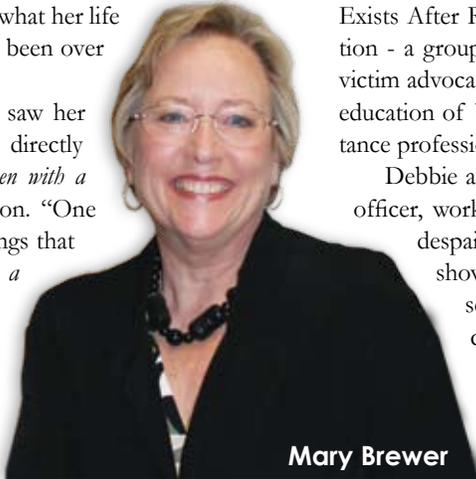
Suzi Williamson

quality of life as they transition from one level of health care to another.”

Mary’s daughter, Carrie, an epidemiologist, was a witness to her mother’s involvement in health care for all of those years and when the time came she was able to write a *Women with a Cause* nomination for her mother with a unique perspective.

“She grew up on the sidelines of my health care advocacy,” Mary explains. “The nomination was a real honor, especially coming from her with her being in a health care field as well. She kind of wrote about my work from what her life experience had been over the years.”

Mary saw her cause benefit directly from the *Women with a Cause* recognition. “One of the nice things that *Women with a Cause* did was raise awareness of age management issues. It created a lot of



Mary Brewer

hope and encouragement for the people that I work with one-on-one. In the course of a year I come in contact with a lot of people. If they had particular problems or concerns it helped them to know that the community has more to offer than they thought it did. It helped to educate the community. It just brings more sensitivity to it which leads to more creative one-on-one planning.”

**Debbie Smith**

Debbie was honored in last year’s *Women with a Cause* for founding and leading the Hope Exists After Rape Trauma (HEART) foundation - a group that focuses on sexual assault, victim advocacy and DNA legislation, and the education of both the public and victim assistance professionals.

Debbie and her husband, a retired police officer, work full-time for HEART. Debbie despairs that even though statistics show that one in six women are sexually assaulted, victim advocacy programs do not receive the same support and contributions that many other charitable programs enjoy.

“People just don’t get ex-

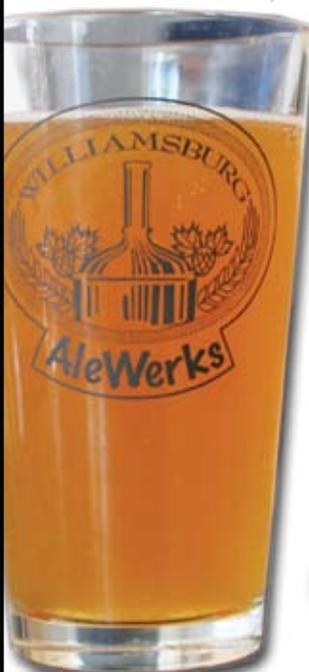
cited about working for this kind of cause; it’s not very glamorous,” she explains. “It’s really hard to get the big time people behind an issue that people just don’t want to talk about. Nobody wants to be the sponsoring company for sexual assault victims.”

Debbie’s determination is unshakable. She does not hesitate to hold up her own experience as a sexual assault victim as proof that it can happen to any woman, anywhere, and at any time.

On March 3rd, 1989 Debbie was abducted from her own home and assaulted at one o’clock in the afternoon, while her husband, a police lieutenant, was upstairs asleep. Debbie has shared her story countless times in an effort to get people to understand how this kind of crime happens.

Debbie paints a chilling and articulate picture of how painful the assault was. Though she was not beaten by her attacker, she pauses and softly adds, “I almost wished he had. Because then I would have had physical marks on me, to say ‘that’s why this hurts so bad’. It was really hard for me to understand when I walked back home on my own two feet why I was hurting worse than I had ever hurt in my entire life.”

# What “Werks” with a Great Williamsburg Dinner?

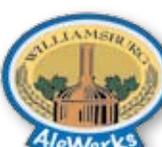


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Her attacker was eventually caught and convicted by DNA evidence. He was the fourth "cold hit" - a match made by comparing cold case assault evidence to a database of convicted criminal DNA - in the state of Virginia and the first such case to go to court.

Debbie says when the trial was over she was determined to put it all behind her and move on; she wanted to return to being the introvert she truly is at heart. "I really just thought 'I just want to put my life back together now' and go on and just live in my little bubble," Debbie explains. "But what happened was that Janet Reno was our Attorney General and she formed a commission on the future of DNA evidence. Their sole purpose was to decide what are we going to do with this information - this whole DNA thing."

Dr. Paul Ferrara, Director of the State Forensics Lab, was a member of that commission. He had also attended the trial of Debbie's attacker to evaluate how scientists and the prosecu-

tor presented DNA evidence to the jury in that landmark case. He had heard Debbie testify; so when the commission decided they needed to interview actual victims whose lives were affected by DNA evidence he thought of her and asked her to testify before the commission. Initially, she was against it. However, with gentle and persistent encouragement from her husband Debbie decided to do it.

Her testimony was well received and Debbie gave her permission for them to post it on their website, thinking no one would ever see it there. But she could not have been more wrong and, as she puts it, her phone has not stopped ringing since!

Last year, when Debbie learned she had been nominated for *Women with a Cause*, she was shocked. "To give you an idea of how much this honor meant to me," Debbie says slowly, "my office is full of plaques and awards from a lot of very important people. I have to say

this is one of my most treasured because to be honored where you live and breathe and people see you at your best and at your worst is to me the greatest honor that you can get. I mean, these people know who I am and I think to be honored by the people you really live with every day...when I found out what it was really all about I was just overwhelmed to be recognized in my own community."

**Monica Sigmon, *Women with a Cause***

Monica Sigmon is the creative and organizational force behind *Women with a Cause* and all who know her agree that she is a truly remarkable woman herself. A William & Mary graduate and long time Williamsburg resident, Monica is one of the preeminent photographers in the country. In part, because of her success, Monica believes that everyone has the ability and responsibility to give back to the community.

"For me, this is something that I can do," Monica says. "I am not doing any of the things those ladies are doing, not even close, but I can bring them all together and allow them the opportunity to meet up and network and find people who may need their help or find people who can help them."



**Debbie Smith**

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Last year was the first year for *Women with a Cause* and Monica deems it an unqualified success. "Beyond my wildest expectations, absolutely," she says enthusiastically. "I really believed it was a good idea but you never know what other people are going to think about your idea. Once TowneBank started getting involved and once we started receiving the number of nominations we received, that said to me that people were ready for something like this. People started calling to donate things. Everyone just came out of the woodwork and wrapped their arms around this campaign. I wasn't expecting that so soon and so wholeheartedly. That was the most special part of it."

A lot of planning went into the celebration. "My favorite part, that I will never forget, was watching almost 400 people just stay still for more than 30 minutes [to watch the video when the honorees were announced]," Monica recalls. "No one talked, no one went and got a drink, no one went to the bathroom, and they were all transfixed. They were all mesmerized by the stories and just erupting in applause when the names showed up on the screen. It was overwhelming. At that moment those ladies got the chance then to feel the community

supporting them; there was an energy there of good will and gratefulness. And for that to happen in year one was awesome."

Such a resounding success in year one makes for a very tough act to follow in year two. Fortunately the framework has been established and more people know about *Women with a Cause* now which should help to make this year even better.

One thing that Monica has already noticed that is different from last year is that this group of nominees are not so much household names like the nominees were last year. "It's awesome; it's really what we wanted for this program," she says. "My vision for *Women with a Cause* has always been that within five years it is a sold out event, it's a Saturday night, and we're honoring a handful of ladies that we've never ever heard about. The real mission of this is to raise awareness, get some publicity for someone who is doing something that the community doesn't necessarily know about. So I was really, really glad to see the diversity of nominees this year and I think that those people who come to the event will really get to see a nice variety of people that they haven't met before."

This year Monica received almost 50 nominations compared to 35 last year. Knowing that

it would be impossible to celebrate 50 women appropriately in one evening, Monica asked the judges to narrow the nominations down by half. While it was difficult not to be able to celebrate all of the women who were nominated, it was necessary since subsequent *Women with a Cause* events could result in an even greater number of nominations. The judges selected 22 of the nominees. From these, six women were chosen to be the official 2008 *Women with a Cause* honorees. These six women will be announced on May 30th and receive special recognition during the *Women with a Cause* event. A portion of the proceeds from the event go to each of these honorees for their cause.

The one thing that Monica would most like to take away from this event is that someone who is doing something really great and is too modest to get their name out there or talk about what they are doing can now have the opportunity to be presented to the public. "I know that most of these women would not do that for themselves so this is an opportunity for us to do it for them," Monica observes. "And that's awesome, because it is the only way that they can achieve their goals and their dreams; to get some of this publicity and to get people helping." NDN



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## 2008 *Women with a Cause* Nominees

### Kitty Beatty

#### QUALITY PRESCHOOL

Long before kindergarten was available in public schools, Kitty saw the vital positive difference a quality preschool experience could make in the long-term learning of children. She was originally employed as a kindergarten teacher at Greenwood Preschool in 1971, before she and her husband purchased it and ran it soundly for 28 years. In 2002, it was donated to King's Way Church. She remains on staff today and has impacted over 5,000 children in our community.

### Jeanne Black

#### ANGELS OF MERCY HEALTH CLINIC

Jeanne is the founder of the award-winning Angels of Mercy Health Clinic for the uninsured, serving over 1,200 patients from the greater Williamsburg area annually. The clinic, which treats acute and chronically ill patients with an emphasis on primary and secondary prevention, is celebrating its tenth anniversary. Angels of Mercy is unique in that it is nurse-managed and focuses on improving health through a comprehensive therapeutic lifestyle change program.

### Reba Bolden

#### WJCC COMMUNITY ACTION AGENCY

Reba Bolden is the Executive Director of the WJCC Community Action Agency, dedicated to providing services and programs that meet the needs of moderate and low-income individuals and families. The agency's Head Start pre-school program is one of two in the state of Virginia to receive the Gold Seal of Excellence. Reba is passionate about serving families in ways that guide them into becoming economically self-sufficient, as well as providing opportunities for education, well-being, and positive life choices. [www.actionagency.org](http://www.actionagency.org)

### Jan Michelle Brown

#### SPIRITWORKS FOUNDATION

As the founder of SpiritWorks Foundation Center for the Soul, Jan provides our community with a center that offers children, youth, and adults programs and services specifically geared towards living in recovery. Jan was introduced to alcohol at the age of 4 and was an addict by 12. Sober now for 21 years, Jan lives in recovery and is dedicated to helping others, passionately sharing her message: "Recovery Rocks...Pass It On". [www.spiritworksfoundation.org](http://www.spiritworksfoundation.org)

### Ingrid Brown

#### THE ARTS

Ingrid has spent countless volunteer hours serving on the Board for Occasion of the Arts, working at This Century Art Gallery, playing in the William & Mary Orchestra, all in addition to serving as the President of the Williamsburg Symphonia League since 2002. Because of Ingrid's leadership, the League has become a prime contributor of funding for The Symphonia and ranks in the top tier nationally based on its financial support. [www.williamsburgsymphonia.org](http://www.williamsburgsymphonia.org)

### Jane Medlin Burton

#### THE ARTS

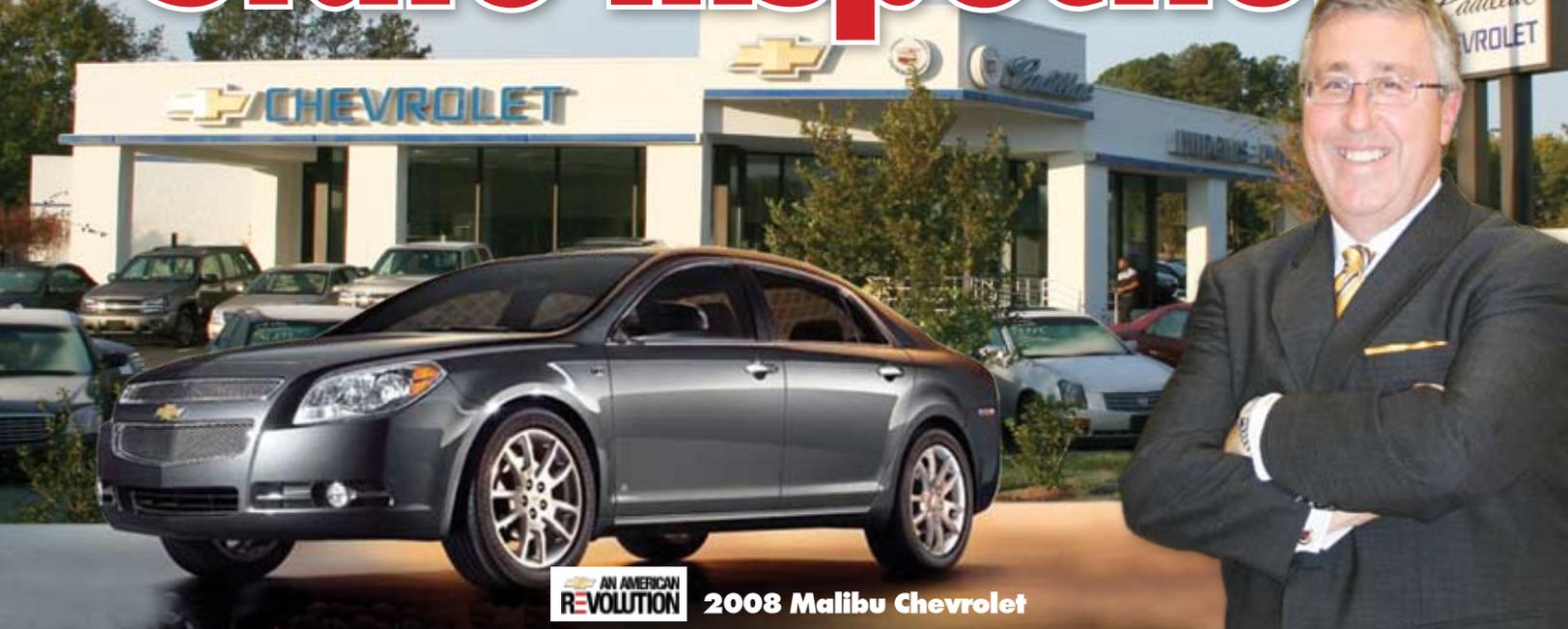
Jane is an active leader in community arts, serving as President of the Board for both the Williamsburg Symphonia and Occasion of the Arts. Under her direction, the Symphonia is now fiscally sound and involved in several artistic collaborations throughout the community, including the Muscarelle Museum of Art, the Williamsburg Choral Guild, and the College of William & Mary.

### Carolyn Cloninger

#### AMERICAN CANCER SOCIETY

Four years ago, Carolyn's daughter, Hayes, was diagnosed with a brain tumor in the first grade. During her hospital stays, Hayes and her mom began to make bracelets to give the hospital staff as small tokens of their appreciation. News spread and their jewelry became a hot item. Since then, the demand for their jewelry and note cards has only increased, and Hayes and Carolyn donate 100% of the money they earn to Relay for Life...contributing over \$30,000 in the last two years! They hope to raise at least another \$7,000 this year.

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## Sally S. Craig

### THE WILLIAMSBURG CONSORT

Sally Craig is the founder and president of the Williamsburg Consort, an annual symphonic band festival featuring 100 retired musicians from 35 states. Additional events include swing band dances, ensemble concerts, workshops at William & Mary and Warhill High School, outreach programs at Chamberl, and scholarships for local high school band students. [www.wmbgconsort.org](http://www.wmbgconsort.org)

## Margaret Cullivan

### PEOPLE

As the Director of Volunteer Services, Auxiliary Services, and Guest Services at Sentara Williamsburg Regional Medical Center, Margaret leads a team of over 500 volunteers who assist in serving the needs of patients, their families and friends, and the staff and physicians. Margaret has a passion for patient-centered care and helping others. She is active on local community boards, in her professional field, and with the College of William & Mary's Catholic Campus Ministry.

## Ginny Dittman

### CHEMO CAPS

An active member of the hospital's auxiliary, Ginny launched the Pineapple Knitters "Chemo Caps" team at Sentara Regional Medical Center in 2003. These 15 volunteers knit and donate a wide variety of hand-made hats, or "chemo caps", to cancer

patients who lose their hair. The soft, hand-knitted caps provide comfort to the patients' heads and souls, and lets them know that someone cared enough to knit them a cap. To date, they have knitted and donated over 700 chemo caps throughout our community.

## Dr. Lindy Dunn

### BREAST CANCER AWARENESS

Lindy is passionate about educating, helping, encouraging and alleviating the "fear" of breast cancer for women. She first introduced the annual Breast Cancer Survivors' Retreat over five years ago. She has been active in getting the word out to women locally that they must be responsible for their own breast health ever since she started practicing radiology at the Women's Imaging Center here in Williamsburg. Lindy speaks to groups all over Williamsburg and beyond, such as local clubs, college groups, ladies' golf events, and community education projects.

## Mary Beth Gibson

### BREAST CANCER AWARENESS

Mary Beth is the co-founder of Beyond Boobs, Inc., a non-profit organization dedicated to nurturing and supporting young women who have been diagnosed with breast cancer and educating women of all ages about breast health. This group provides monthly support, as well as direct services to young women throughout the peninsula who have, or have had, breast cancer. Beyond Boobs also speaks to groups within the community regarding breast

health. [www.beyondboobsinc.org](http://www.beyondboobsinc.org)

## Sarah Kadec

### JCC CITIZENS COALITION (J4C)

Sarah saw a need to organize concerned individuals, homeowners associations, environmental groups, and other organizations into one entity which would give citizens a stronger voice and identity with our local government. Thus, three years ago, Sarah founded the J4C to protect the environment and quality of life in James City County and the surrounding areas. They also conduct research, prepare positions, and organize community education forums.

## Kimberly Kay

### CHILDREN'S CONSIGNMENT SALE

Kimberly leads the King of Glory Lutheran Church consignment sale to recycle children's clothing, toys, and books. Various non-profit groups in town benefit from the items that come into the sale, as well as from the money raised. Anything that does not sell is donated to the Children's Hospital of the King's Daughters and the Youth Challenged Thrift stores.

## Pat McCormick

### GROVE CHRISTIAN OUTREACH CENTER

Pat is passionate about sharing Christ with those in need in the Grove area of James City County and has served as Executive Director of Grove Christian Outreach Center for the past 8 years. GCOC provides food, clothing, financial assistance, school

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**Liz Moore**

**CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL OF THE KING'S DAUGHTERS**

Liz's passion to support the Children's Hospital of the Kings Daughters began when her twin sons, Grayson and Parker, were born prematurely at under 2 pounds in 1992, and she and her husband experienced the miracles of the hospital firsthand. A fundraiser and advocate for CHKD ever since, Liz and her team host an annual gala to benefit the hospital, as well as coordinate a variety of fundraisers and activities for the hospital's benefit.

**Ann Buckles Orteig**

**THE JAIL MINISTRY**

Active at local treatment centers since 1975, it was in 1991 that Ann began volunteering at the Regional Jail with women inmates. With this ministry, she teaches women everything from learning more about themselves, to building relationships, to writing resumes. She also teaches a "Celebrate Recovery" class based on AA's Twelve Step Program.

**Nancy Paschall**

**DREAM CATCHERS**

Dream Catchers at the Cori Sikich Therapeutic Riding Center provides therapeutic horseback rid-

ing and other horse-related activities to people with special needs in a caring and safe environment. During Nancy's first year as Executive Director, she has overseen the build-out of this premier facility, doubled the horse herd, and increased the student population to greater than 75 special needs students per week. [www.dreamcatcherswilliamsburg.org](http://www.dreamcatcherswilliamsburg.org)

**Sue Pearce**

**DREAM CATCHERS**

Sue began her involvement at Dream Catchers after her daughter, Emily, began working there as a volunteer five years ago. In March of 2007, she became President of the Board. Together with the entire Board of Directors, Advisory Board, staff, and volunteers, the center has doubled the number of special needs students that it serves. Fundraising efforts have been quite successful and Dream Catchers at the Cori Sikich Therapeutic Riding Center has become a leader in its field. [www.dreamcatcherswilliamsburg.org](http://www.dreamcatcherswilliamsburg.org)

**Lois Polifka**

**SENIOR CITIZENS**

Lois teaches computer literacy to community seniors. She works part-time with Senior Advocate, meeting with seniors and networking groups to distribute the Senior Advocate Resource Guide. In addition to the many other volunteer positions she holds in various organizations dedicated to seniors, she works with the Chamber and Tourism Alliance's Community Leadership Service program which is dedicated to recruiting, training, and inspiring area

retirees to become involved in our community.

**Robyn Sulanowski**

**HUMAN AND ANIMAL WELFARE**

For over ten years, Robyn has been involved in various organizations. She has been the Logistics Coordinator for Relay For Life since its inception. She is a member of the Heritage Humane Society's Auxiliary, where she chairs the Run for Their Lives 5K and Bark in the Park. Her dogs, Max and Socks, are therapy dogs with K-9 Connection and she is their Special Events Coordinator.

**Catherine Upton**

**WILLIAMSBURG AREA MEALS ON WHEELS**

Catherine Upton is the Executive Director for Williamsburg Area Meals on Wheels and has been for fourteen years. WMOV delivers hot, nutritious meals Monday through Friday to those in our community 18 and older who are unable to prepare their own meals due to a physical or mental impairment. Service is based on need, not income. [www.wmbg-mealsonwheels.com](http://www.wmbg-mealsonwheels.com)

**Want to go?**

The 2nd Annual *Women with a Cause* Celebration will be held Friday, May 30th at 7 p.m. at TowneBank in Williamsburg. Tickets may be purchased at Monica Sigmon Photography and TowneBank. \$60 per person/\$100 per couple. For more information, go to [www.womenwithacause.org](http://www.womenwithacause.org) or call 757-564-8533. **NDN**

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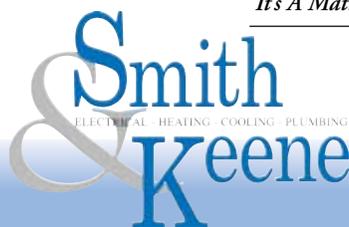
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# Melissa Cantrell

## Ready to roll up her shirt sleeves

By Meredith Collins

If your perception of the Junior Women's Club of Williamsburg (JWCW) evokes images of attractive, well-to-do young women meeting in a high society fashion while their successful husbands do the "real work" of bringing home big paychecks – think again. The JWCW is anything but this. The work they do collectively not only results in sizable donations for much needed community projects, but their "roll up their shirt sleeves" attitudes create the kind of direct impact on people's lives that money can never buy.

Melissa Cantrell, President of the JWCW, is a shining example of a true JWCW woman and she defies all of the old stereotypes traditionally associated with this women's group. While she is young and attractive, she's also a sharp businesswoman who provides effective leadership designed to put her willing members to work for various community organizations and causes.

Melissa grew up in Roanoke, VA and attended Wake Forest University in Winston

Salem, NC. It was there that she met her husband, Joe, and two years later they were married. They lived in Raleigh, NC as newlyweds and eventually made their way to Williamsburg where Joe had spent time during his high school years. The couple has lived in Williamsburg for twelve years with their two young children.

"Family is absolutely my number one priority," Melissa said. "I think there's some of that missing in the world today and my husband and I make that a strong priority."

**It is such a great feeling to know that we worked hard, we made this money and we're able to put it back into the community to do good things.**

- Melissa Cantrell

While Melissa was always firmly grounded in raising her children, she also knew that she wanted to do more with her life. "There was just a little bit missing," Melissa explained. "I needed to get outside of the home some. One of my good friends was a member of the JWCW and invited me to a meeting." Even though Melissa initially had some reservations about visiting the club, she decided to go. She, too, had the idea that it would be a group of

wealthy young women who came together for a social outlet and very little else. It didn't take her long to discover, however, that she couldn't have been more off-base.

"Basically, I was drawn in at the first meeting," Melissa recalled. "I liked the things that they were doing. The women were very nice. It was a diverse group of women – not what I expected to walk in and find. I just jumped in with both feet!"

In January 2004, she was inducted into the club. From that moment on, it was fast-forward for Melissa. Within six months, she became Dean of Members and worked as a go-between between the members and board. She also kept the roster and attendance records which allowed her to get to know all of the members very quickly. The following year, Melissa became Fundraising Chair and following that, Donations Chair.

"The donations committee is one of my favorite committees," Melissa said. "We sit down as a club and we take all of the applications and we take the amount of money that we have raised and we divide it among the (non-profit) organizations. We try really hard to

make sure everybody gets something. It is such a great feeling to know that we worked hard, we made this money and we're able to put it back into the community to do good things."

This past year, Melissa left the position of Donations Chair to become President of the organization and she is now entering her second term as President, something that only three women have accomplished – back-to-back terms as president – since the club was first formed in 1954.

Melissa believes it is important to get out into the community and be involved and she does not see JWCW as a one-dimensional type of organization. She seeks opportunities for her members to do good work in the community wherever that work is needed and fosters an environment of "hands on" service.

"The donations are great," Melissa stressed. "The organizations need money to operate. But the membership we have right now is very interested in actually going out and doing volunteer work for organizations. The hardest part is balancing the needs of the community with the time that our members have."

Melissa smiles when she thinks about the perception some people may still have of the club.

"We have a lot of women who work," Melissa explained. "So they work full-time, and then some of them work full-time and have children at home, and they still make time for JWCW because they feel strongly that they want to give back to the community."

This same passion is clearly what makes JWCW a big part of Melissa's life and you can see this emotion on her face when she talks about how strongly she and the women in



their tents and showcase their talent in Merchants Square and along Boundary Street. Monies raised from this event are donated to various arts organizations and also provide money for art scholarships to local high school seniors. Casino Night, another well-known event, allows JWCW to grant a wish to a terminally ill child through the Make A Wish Foundation of Eastern Virginia.

Throughout the year, however, there are ways that Melissa and her JWCW members quietly demonstrate their love for what they do, and for their community. Last Christmas, when the Salvation Army Angel Tree was displayed in Williamsburg Outlet Mall, the incoming donations of gifts and clothing were overwhelming and there wasn't enough manpower to begin to organize and sort the items. The gifts deposited there by those who wanted to improve the holiday season for needy families were to benefit several hundred families and had to be sorted and ready for Christmas. Melissa found out about the need through one of the

JWCW feel about what they are doing.

"It has meant a lot to me to be in this organization," Melissa said thoughtfully. "I feel very fortunate in my life. There are people out there who are not fortunate and it's just a passion in me to give back because I do feel fortunate in my life. I've met a lot of great people through this club. We've done a lot of great work. It's just something I feel good about every day."

As a member of this community, you may be aware of the high profile fundraisers that the JWCW orchestrates, like the recent annual Art on the Square art show which just completed its 45th year. Over 150 artists set up

JWCW members and the organization quickly went to work, contributing over 50 hours to help separate toys and to make sure they were safe and not on any recall lists. Their "roll up their shirt sleeves" attitude allowed the many gifts to make it to their destinations in time for Christmas.

"We're a little bit everywhere," Melissa summarized. "It's a group of women with big hearts."

Perhaps you could say they are a group with strong backs as well. One thing's for sure, Melissa and the women of JWCW have given the organization a whole new reputation and it is one well worth emulating. **NDN**

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# Clemenza Braxton

## Encouraging Students to Be Their Best has Produced a Lifetime of Rewards

By Sara Lewis

When Williamsburg City Councilman Robert “Bobby” Braxton suggested to his mother, Clemenza Fields Braxton, that he reproduce her worn Rolodex cards, she thought he was just being helpful. But he had an ulterior motive. He went through the approximately 600 cards to invite the beloved teacher’s students, colleagues, and friends to her 90th birthday party. That was four years ago and Clemenza is still making friends.

“I send about 250 Christmas cards every year,” said Clemenza. Because friendship is most often returned, she is continually rewarded for taking the time to encourage and befriend others. Usually, her actions aren’t intentional but come from her genuinely caring and interested nature. Because she taught school for nearly thirty years, she has had the extra opportunity to befriend many new people each year.

When she looks back over her life, a youthful and petite Clemenza is most proud of the lasting relationships that have evolved. Sometimes you can make a difference in the lives of others to such a degree that your

influence lasts a lifetime.

“I got as much out of teaching as I hope my students did. At the time that I was doing it I didn’t realize I was having an impact,” she said while explaining that many of her former students write often, visit when they are in town, or stop by to chat when the family goes out to a restaurant or event. “I really love that.”

In addition, Clemenza has been very involved in First Baptist Church and other Christian organizations. She has sung in the choir, played the organ, taught Sunday school, and participated in Bible study. It is easy to imagine her Rolodex growing and growing.

Clemenza grew up in Hampton and attended Hampton Institute, now Hampton University. Her young life provided many opportunities to learn from the examples of family members who pursued professions in law, medicine, education, and religion. She moved to Wil-

liamsburg with her new husband in 1936. “I came here as a bride, the night we were married ... with all the shoes and everything behind the car,” she recalled.

She has lived on  
B r a x -  
t o n

Court in the city ever since.

When Clemenza took her first teaching position in New Kent County in 1937, she was happy to get the job, even though she taught first through third grades when she was prepared to teach high school. “It was a community that really wanted its children educated. Parents were so much behind them, 100% behind them,” she said. “The children were so eager to learn.”

While her own children, Bobby and David, were young, she taught as a substitute at small schools in Chickahominy, Croaker, Toano, and other locations. Bruton Heights consolidated the smaller schools and in 1952 she was hired fulltime to teach in the English department there.

She loved teaching.

“I always encouraged my students to be the best they could be,” she said. During the 1950s and 1960s, Clemenza taught in the English Department, eventually becoming the chair. She has fond memories of enthusiastic children with a strong desire to learn. The stresses of the 1960s interrupted that optimistic ardor. “It sort of died out a little bit during integration,” she reflected. “Kids were undecided about what was happening.” She went on to teach at Berkeley and retired in 1978.

Clemenza took time to teach individuals. Today, her former students live all across the country and have pursued a variety of careers in medicine, education, and other fields. They make a difference in part because Clemenza made a difference in their lives. “Back then you had more time to give to individuals.

Every-  
one  
i s



not the same and you have to treat the differences,” she said. “That’s what I enjoyed about the years back then. You had more time to help with skills and everything else.

She enjoyed counseling informally, too. While at Bruton Heights, she recalls walking home with students along Duke of Gloucester Street and stopping at Highs Ice Cream, then located on Prince George Street. She talked with students about personal problems and encouraged their dreams. “I had some of the best children. I wanted the children to achieve,” she recalled.

Clemenza taught dramatics and dancing as well as English and feels that these artistic pursuits gave students a sense of self-esteem. She helped them learn social courtesies. She remembers an occasion when there were eighty couples on the gym floor in their semi-formal gowns and white gloves dancing the waltz.

“Some girls didn’t want to wear gloves,” Clemenza explained. “They said, ‘You really want us to wear white gloves?’ But when they did, they enjoyed it.” She believes that dressing up made the young people feel better about themselves.

Her drama team excelled, once attending the state competition at Virginia State University. “They came out on top.” She taught Shakespeare in the eighth grade and the students liked Romeo and Juliet and stories about kings. “I had them do character studies at Berkeley. One of my best students did a character study of Frankenstein,” she said.

Clemenza worked with music teacher Jackie Prater to develop week-long extravaganzas of the arts. Each night would feature a different art – choir, dance, and instrumental music – followed by a special guest and capped by a finale. “Our students had never been exposed to dancing ... They just ate it up.” Extravaganzas were held at Bruton and then Berkeley, but ended due to the stress of integration and changes of the late 1960s and 1970s.

Clara Byrd Baker, another teacher after whom a James City County elementary school is named, mentored her. “She was very instrumental in encouraging me to join organizations,” Clemenza said. “With her encouragement I started the first Intermediate Girl Scout Troop here in Williamsburg.” Clemenza remembers that Clara was very involved and encouraged others to do the same. “Lois Hornsby reminds me of her,” she added. They were and are prominent in community matters and devoted to family.

The memories of individuals she has worked with and stories of students who have succeeded in life could fill volumes. “I am most proud of the relationships that I built with my students, my staff. They are personally rewarding. I have students who write to me very often. Those who I tried to help, who needed help, they became successful in spite of themselves.” One student told her he wanted to be a journalist. He visited her recently and shared his accomplished resume. “When I got him he could hardly read!” she exclaimed.

She is enriched by the pats on the back and the thankful comments. “I was so blessed. I have visitors often. We dine out and talk about old times. I wanted to give something. I wanted them to achieve something.”

Clemenza has advice for those who want to make a difference. “Whatever you do, have a love for doing it. That will tell the whole story. If you love what you are doing, you will do your best. I loved teaching. I loved working in the church. If you love something then you are really doing what you’re doing because it is just a part of you.” NDN

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# Liz Moore

## Tireless in Her Support for the Children's Hospital of the King's Daughter

By Suzi Drake

Nearly sixteen years ago, Liz Moore walked into her first Lamaze class an excited first-time mother-to-be. Twenty five weeks into her pregnancy her anticipated due date just fifteen weeks away, it was time for her and husband, Roger, to begin preparing for the birth of twins.

"This was the day I found out the babies were coming – soon," Liz remembers.

Though doctors were able to delay the premature delivery for a short while, the twins were born fifteen weeks early. Both so tiny and fragile, they barely tipped the scale's sensor, weighing in at one pound, 12 ounces and one pound, 14 ounces.

"This was also the day I was introduced to the Children's Hospital," Liz said.

The Moore's first-born did not make it through the first 24 hours. But his twin, Grayson, pulled through and underwent an immediate and successful heart surgery at Children's Hospital of the King's Daughter in Norfolk. The next three-

and-a-half months of his life were spent in an incubator in the hospital's neo-natal intensive care unit. To look at this healthy, happy young man of fifteen now, you would never know it.

"He is just perfect," Liz says proudly.

It was during those stressful hours sitting in the waiting room of the hospital, as one-day-old Grayson underwent his heart surgery, that Liz pledged her unending gratitude to the children's health care facility.

"I swore to my husband that if we all survived this, I would be forever indebted to the hospital," Liz said.

So began Liz's volunteer and fundraising work for the non-profit hospital that she often refers to as a "gem" in the community. Doing what she could for the hospital on her own for ten years, Liz upped the ante in 2003 – the same year she opened her own real estate brokerage firm, Liz Moore & Associates.

"When I opened my own firm, I felt I was finally in the position to direct a corporate charity and I could start to do things in a bigger way, rather than just as an individual," she said.

Liz Moore & Associates adopted Children's Hospital of the King's



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Daughters as its official charity and has since raised more than \$40,000 for its operation, which includes a new Newport News facility at Oyster Point.

“From my perspective, it’s a joy to be able to give back,” Liz said. “Especially when you go through something like I went through with Grayson and you find yourself in a position to do so.”

To accomplish her charitable goals, Liz has organized a slew of fundraisers, including an annual gala event, which raised more than \$14,000 its first year, and a dress-down day at her firm, which, for a \$20 donation, gives each employee the option to substitute jeans and T-shirts for their usual suits and ties.

“We actually make about \$6,000 each year during dress-down day. They are so used to wearing pantyhose and collared shirts, \$20 must seem like a bargain,” Liz quipped.

But the reality is that the children’s hospital has touched so many people’s lives, both in her firm and in the community, that \$20 to help continue the work done there is an easy donation for most people to make.

“Having that kind of health care in the community really helps the whole community. So many people have had such positive experiences with the hospital,” Liz said. “People say fundraising is hard, but I guess it matters what you are fundraising for. In this community, it is so easy to raise money for the children’s hospital.”

The hospital, both the Norfolk location and the new facility in Newport News, offers a spectrum of care options – from ongoing care for chronic illness and outpatient surgery, to primary care and emergency services – all specifically designed to meet the unique needs of its young patients.

“They are so geared toward kids and understanding the need to take the fear out of the whole experience, for both the children and the parents,” Liz said. “They are true professionals; they know what they are doing.”

Just how adept the hospital’s staff is came into full view at the tail end of those fateful hours in the waiting room during baby Grayson’s heart surgery.

“When the surgeon finally came out to tell us how the surgery went, I was just fixated on his hands,” Liz remembers. “They were bigger than Grayson’s whole body and I just remember thinking, ‘How do they do it?’ It was then I realized that what they do is truly a miracle.”

Now, Liz uses her position on the hospital’s Peninsula Board of Advisors, as well as the interactions she has with more than 1,000 families each year through her brokerage firm, to get the word out about the Children’s Hospital and the amazing, life-saving work that goes on there.

“To have that kind of facility right in our back yard is such a blessing,” Liz said.

In the coming years, Liz hopes to expand the contributions she and her company are able to make to the hospital, which relies on the generosity of the community, endowments and grants to operate. As she sees it, it is her way of saying “Thank you” for giving her and Roger the greatest gift in the whole world.

“I don’t feel that I could ever really repay the hospital,” Liz said. “They saved my child’s life. How do you repay that?” **NDN**

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WILLIAMSBURG LANDING

# Sharron Cornelius

## Community Supporter, Project Initiator and Inspiring Leader

By Brandy Centolanza

Sharron Cornelius, the Executive Director of United Way of Greater Williamsburg for more than a decade, credits her mother, Erma, with instilling her with the value of helping others.

“My mother taught me many lessons,” Sharron says. “My mother taught me the spirit of giving without seeking recognition.”

Sharron takes that seriously, downplaying all that she has brought to the table since taking over the helm of the local United Way. Her accomplishments as Executive Director are extensive. During her tenure, the annual campaign fund has doubled, from \$1 million to \$2 million. Sharron has also led the formation of several local coalitions and taskforces to address growing needs and concerns within the community, among them the Historic Triangle Substance Abuse Coalition, the Senior Services Coalition,



the Kids First Coalition, the Network for Latino People, the Homeless Task Force, and others.

“I like working in the community,” Sharron says. “I think this community is fantastic, and we are working together so, so well.”

Sharron first became involved with the United Way more than 20 years ago in Greensboro, North Carolina. As the administrator for the Commission on the Status of Women, Sharron worked first-hand with the planning director of the United Way there.

“Greensboro was a very meaningful experience,” she recalls. “I saw how effective United Way worked within the community and was impressed with how well they worked together to address many of the issues.” Among those issues were equal pay for equal work, substance abuse, and domestic violence. Sharron assisted with the establishment of the first refuge for

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battered women and children in the state of North Carolina.

Sharron was later hired as an Associate Director for the United Way in Raleigh and has worked in various roles within the organization all across the country before settling into her current post roughly ten years ago.

"I had always loved Williamsburg, so coming to work here was like a dream come true," Sharron shares.

Soon after, the United Way of Greater Williamsburg teamed up with the Williamsburg Community Health Foundation to form the Historic Triangle Funders Forum, a group of government and community officials who meet quarterly to discuss the needs of the community. An offshoot of the funders group, Planning,

Analysis, Collaboration, & Evaluation, or PACE, meets to do more in-depth research on needs assessments.

"I'm so excited because it's really working," Sharron says. "This has given me hope.

We are really coming together to help this community, which we all care about. Our community is growing rapidly. I believe by us working together, we can be proactive to address the changing needs of our community. What the United

**"Our community is growing rapidly. I believe by us working together, we can be proactive to address the changing needs of our community."**

-Sharron Cornelius

Way is really about is impact and building healthy communities."

Kerry Mellette, President and CEO of Williamsburg Community Health Foundation, has worked closely with Sharron for years.

"Sharron has been a steadfast supporter,

participant, and project initiator for over ten years with the Historic Triangle Funders Forum," Kerry says.

Sharron is also a member of the Williamsburg-James City County School Education Foundation, the Government Affairs Committee of the Greater Williamsburg Chamber and Tourism Alliance, Leave-A-Legacy Board, and has also served on the Board of Walsingham Academy.

When Sharron is not busy with her civic duties, she enjoys reading, traveling, and spending time with her husband, Bob, her four children, and seven grandchildren. Hobbies, however, usually take a backburner to her involvement with the United Way. She remains committed to bringing about a better quality of life for the citizens here.

"If one person hurts, then we all hurt," Sharron says. "I believe through the resources of its wonderful volunteers the United Way can truly advance the common good for our entire community." NDN

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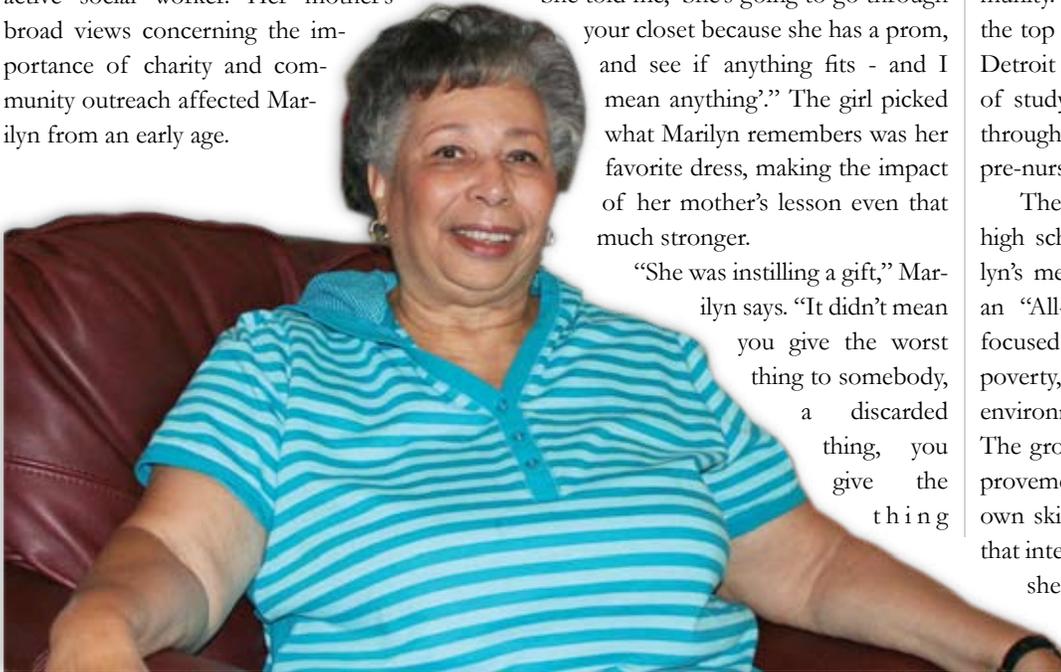
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# Marilyn Taylor

## A Lifetime of Giving Back

By Ashley Bateman  
William & Mary Intern

President of the Greater Williamsburg Women's Association (GWWA), Marilyn Smith Taylor is certainly no newcomer to serving her community. Born and raised in Detroit, Michigan, Marilyn's mother was an active social worker. Her mother's broad views concerning the importance of charity and community outreach affected Marilyn from an early age.



"I remember one time when we were in high school we had the opportunity to go to socials with nice dresses and all the rest of that," Marilyn said reminiscently. "She [her mother] brought this young woman home.

She told me, 'She's going to go through your closet because she has a prom, and see if anything fits - and I mean anything.'" The girl picked what Marilyn remembers was her favorite dress, making the impact of her mother's lesson even that much stronger.

"She was instilling a gift," Marilyn says. "It didn't mean you give the worst thing to somebody, a discarded thing, you give the thing

that you think that person would like." The lesson was a lasting one.

Attending a College Prep Technical High School encouraged Marilyn's passion for achievement and reaching out in the community. The student body was comprised of the top ten percent of eighth graders in the Detroit area and the students chose a course of study or major that they would focus on throughout the four years. Marilyn chose the pre-nursing track.

The group of young women she met in high school remains a major part of Marilyn's memory. She recalls that they formed an "All-City Young Girls Group," which focused on community concerns including poverty, feeding the poor, cleaning up the environment, and related outreach programs. The group of girls also focused on self-improvement and worked on developing their own skills as group members. "I developed that interest - being part of a group - young," she said.

While at Michigan State University as an undergraduate, Mari-

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lyn moved away from her previous interest in pre-nursing to focus on sociology. Upon completing her degree at Michigan State she was accepted into the Graduate School for Social Work at Howard University in Washington, D.C. At Howard, Marilyn was a member of the first class to go into the School of Social Work without previous work experience in the field. She was one of four admitted directly from an Undergraduate Program.

Those early life experiences set the tone for Marilyn's approach to life - giving where she could and networking with other women who were like-minded. It's no wonder that when Marilyn moved to the Williamsburg area in December of 1999, she sought an environment where she could continue to work with others to serve the community she lived in.

The manner in which she and her husband discovered the southern Virginia town while living in West Chester County, New York was unique.

"We were at a Christmas party, before

moving, with some of our friends and they were saying 'What are we going to do after retirement?'," she remembered. "Taxes and everything in New York are really expensive. I said 'let's have a potluck and just talk about where people want to go'."

The potluck dinner actually turned into a plan. It was decided that the couples would visit different possible retirement spots and report back to the group.

"We decided to take a trip down the Eastern United States and see how different places felt," Marilyn said of her and her husband. "We were going to come here because we liked college towns and we had a friend who lived in Richmond. We liked that we would be someplace people would like to visit."

When the potluck couples met again to discuss their travels, the most popular destination presented was Sarasota, Florida, but according to Marilyn she couldn't even get her husband to consider it. "He just saw it as flat and hot," she remembers. "He wanted someplace with seasons."

Once settling on Williamsburg as their

## Next Door Neighbors

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destination, the Taylors chose a plot of land in Ford's Colony and began the process of having a house built. The Taylors met another local family, and the topic of discussion turned to volunteer work in the community.

"So from the first moment, people we began to meet were talking about where they volunteered," Marilyn said. "I realized that a lot of people in Williamsburg were very involved in their community. It was so much easier than I thought it was going to be to transition."

Marilyn has happily continued her involvement in community work and is currently president of the GWWA. In fact, she was the original founder of the organization in 2003. The idea was conceived as Marilyn and other women new to the community sought to combine their knowledge with local women who had been living in the area for many years. Believing that local women would offer vital perspectives on the community, Marilyn began holding womens' "teas", and by 2003 the GWWA was officially founded.

The goals of the GWWA are the same as when the organization was first founded.

"We really believe in giving back," Marilyn stressed. The twenty-five women who made up the original group have now grown to thirty-two members of all ages and backgrounds. Their first year focus was to become educated about local organizations serving the community. What Marilyn called "getting ourselves informed."

The GWWA's first fundraiser was to benefit Old Town Medical Clinic, their second-year theme being "Women and Health." This year a lot of their attention has been focused on exposing children to fine arts and improving related programs. They are also supporting the building of a women's shelter in Yorktown. For the past several years the GWWA has participated in "Read Across America," held annual art contests for children, and supported all kinds of programs for the visual arts. This year they have expanded some programs to include the performing arts.

In 2006 the GWWA created an event that Marilyn is especially proud of. The event, *In Celebration of the Art of Music*, presented Tracy Adele Cooper, a dramatic soprano, and Williamsburg Symphonia Artists in concert.

This past year the GWWA held a previewing workshop for children and their parents attending the Symphonia's family concert, and then a week after sponsored a review/evaluation session for children to discuss what they had seen and experienced.

"One of the youngest children, he was five or six, was on the edge of his seat through the whole concert; he loved it. Even if you introduce one or two children to the appreciation of music, you can encourage them to enrich their lives by that," Marilyn said. "I think we like to keep informed and busy about what's going on in the community...it's to support our young people and to help them appreciate different community experiences."

Just as Marilyn's mother taught her the value of giving, she has instilled the same in her own children. Her son and daughter-in-law live in Princeton, New Jersey and carry on the concept of community charity and involvement. Sometimes the best things we can leave with others are the lessons we teach. Those are lasting gifts that truly make a difference. NDN

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**June 7, 2008**

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