

## Tom Uzarski Celebration of Polka Music Ends on High Note

By Matthew Gryczan

While it was billed as the “3rd Annual Tom Uzarski Day,” the celebration at Fifth Street Hall that drew more than 100 people last month had a much greater meaning than a tribute to one man.

And Tom would have wanted it that way, said his sister Linda Boruta, who attended the May 21 celebration of polka music with her husband Michael, a disc jockey with the popular Polka Pops radio show that airs every Saturday and Sunday on Jethro FM.

“He wasn’t the kind of person who wanted to draw attention to himself,” she said. “But it was a whole different story when it came to polka music and Polish heritage. He did everything he could for years to promote those things.”

Families related to Uzarski and Gerry and Mona Kaminski have teamed up to throw a party each year that celebrates the gusto that he put into keeping polka music and traditions alive in Grand Rapids. The organizers donated profits from the event to the Polish Heritage Society, which amounted to \$1,000. Incoming PHS President Teresa Bonham said the

society greatly appreciated the generous donation, which will be used to keep Polish traditions alive in metro Grand Rapids.

“We all raise a glass to toast him on Tom Uzarski Day, but what we’re really celebrating is Tom’s tremendous passion for polka music and his commitment to Polish heritage,” said Mona, wife of musician Gerry, the founder of Gerry Kaminski’s Polka Network and other local polka bands. “That’s why we also call it ‘In Memory of Our Brothers – and Sisters – of the Note.’”

Gerry, whose band shared the stage at Fifth Street Hall with The Noteables band, said the celebration is now a tribute to all past local musicians and promoters of polka music, with hopes that it will strengthen interest in Polish-American music and polka dance steps.

By that measure, the event was a success for Kenny Swain and 5-year-old Lily Miller. Swain, 66, trumpeter who played for Bob Brock & The B-Tones, Tom

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*Lily Miller takes a polka lesson from Kenny Swain at Fifth Street Hall during Tom Uzarski Day*

## PHS General Membership Meeting

Circle the date June 25 on your calendars for a general meeting of the Polish Heritage Society that will feature a meet-and-greet of fresh faces on the board, an interesting presentation on a history mystery at Holy Cross Cemetery and a free picnic lunch!

Two new General Directors, a new President and new Recording Secretary will be installed at the general meeting to be held starting noon at Oriole Park, 1380 42nd St. SW

in Wyoming. The general meeting is open to members and non-members alike, but only members will be able to cast votes on matters brought up before the board.

Thaddeus “Tad” Broda and Rosemary (Prusinski) Maciejewski – who are entirely new to the society’s governing body -- were elected to General Director positions at the May 15 board Meeting

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The Polish Heritage Society of Grand Rapids promotes Polish/Lithuanian culture in the metro Grand Rapids. The Society meets on the 3rd Monday of every month except for December and general meetings in June and October. The society publishes this newsletter monthly. We invite story ideas and content contributions. For more information, please contact Matthew Gryczan, Richard Panek or Marilyn Lignell by writing to [pshgrandrapids@gmail.com](mailto:pshgrandrapids@gmail.com).

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showed the one-two-three polka steps to Miller as she hopped on the dance floor and laughed with glee. "And she asked me to teach her to dance," Swain said with obvious pride. Miller is granddaughter of Sue Szudzik, who said it's important to have kids listen to polka music and learn the dance steps at an early age.

For the first half of the celebration, Gerry and band members Andy Pawlak, Pete Chacho, David Kurdziel, John Zelasko and Paul Futa entertained the crowd with a mix of lively polkas and obereks. Channel 13 On Your Side Reporter Matt Gard was on hand to interview bass guitarist Kurdziel about news that he was recently elected to the International Polka Association Hall of Fame.

"For me, this is the icing on the cake for forty plus years of playing polkas," said Kurdziel, who has performed on more than 70 recordings including the Grammy Award-winning album, Another Polka Celebration by Eddie Blazonczyk Sr.'s Versatones. "It's the ultimate honor in the industry."

Originally from Buffalo, N.Y., Kurdziel began playing guitar at age 11 and joined his first band, The Melody Men, at age 12. After graduating from the Buffalo Academy of Visual and Performing Arts in 1981, he played with several polka bands before relocating to Grand Rapids with his late wife Linda.

After moving here, Kurdziel played with Gerry Kaminski's Merry Makers and Eddie Blazonczyk's Versatones before those groups disbanded. He joined Gerry Kaminski's Polka Network in 2012.

"There aren't as many polka bands as there used to be," said Kurdziel, 60. "It's on us to bring our kids out to events like these or tune in radio shows to expose them to the music."

During the second half of the

show, The Noteables band played crowd pleasers such as "Wonderful World." This is the second year that The Noteables played at the event, as several band members knew Uzarski quite well.

For those who missed event, there will be an opportunity to hear Gerry Kaminski's Polka Network when the band takes center stage at the Dozynki Polish Harvest Festival at 6 p.m. August 26 at Calder Plaza.



*International Polka Hall of Fame Inductee David Kurdziel*

# PHS Membership News



By Marilyn Lignell

I don't know if I can remember more beautiful weather leading up to Memorial Day than the last week we just had! And it wasn't only the weather that was gorgeous. Fresh and artificial flowers and American flags lining the gravesites at Holy Cross Cemetery created a literal sea of color during what is likely its most visited time of the year.

Cars lined the service roads on Memorial Day for the traditional Mass celebrated at an altar at the columbarium and the playing of Taps to honor the members of the Armed Forces who made the ultimate sacrifice for our country.

But aside from the people who attended Mass, there was a constant stream of visitors throughout the week who were tidying up the graves of family and friends and leaving flowers as visual proof that they aren't forgotten.

Many nationalities claim that giving and receiving flowers is part of their cultures, but I think Poles are particularly

sensitive to visiting graves of loved ones and leaving flowers. Until it was disrupted recently by the Covid epidemic, millions of Poles traveled to their family gravesites for All Saints' Day, the first day of November. They retrieve last year's artificial flowers and lay new ones, along with sometimes leaving votive candles.

In Grand Rapids, I think we Polish-Americans visit around Memorial Day. If a family is lucky, there is at least one child that takes the time to learn where relatives are buried and commits to a lifelong duty of cutting the weeds away from stones that are flush with the ground, putting flowers in a vase or leaving a metal flower basket, and saying a prayer.

Frankly, I feel a tinge of sadness when I see stones that obviously have been half covered with debris for years – testament to a family line that has ended, or none who are in town, or maybe just plain indifference. The last one really bothers me because I think we miss something deep inside when we don't remember where we came from.

After my dad passed away in 1999, I assumed the responsibility of taking my mom to visit the relatives' graves, and we planted irises at the columbarium on the north hill of Holy Cross a few years ago. For the record, my brother John Emil, my father Mitchell John, my

grandparents Mitchell and Mary (Mancewicz) Mileski, and my great grandparents Jan and Teogilia (Gajda) Mancewicz are all at Holy Cross.

Great grandmother Teogilia was rejected at Ellis Island after making the arduous journey from Poland to the United States, but she wasn't the sort to take no for an answer. She made a second voyage and found success – and here I am. Thank you, Teogilia, for your determination, courage and conviction to seek a different life in the U.S. of A.

This year I took my 3-year-old granddaughter Evelyn with my mother, Donna. As you would

expect, there were nonstop questions that had little to do with the cemetery. While we tended to the graves, she kept busy looking for the angels.

But she is young, and I have hope that the spark will ignite in her.

Here's a hearty Witamy to Robin Basarabska-Bruff as a life member!

Robin's great grandparents, John and Teofilia (Blosko) Basarabski didn't know each other when they boarded the same ship sailing from Poland to the United States, but they met during the voyage and fell in love. After making their way

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*Evelyn gives Grandma Donna a hug at Holy Cross Cemetery*

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to Grand Rapids, John and Teofilia settled on the West Side, and John became a member of Polish Falcons, Eastern Avenue and Taxpayers halls.

Robin said her love for polka dancing was handed down from her Dziadzi. "Alma Bouwans' class would perform polka dancing at the Dozynki Festival, where I would dance with her husband, Geno," she said. "One of my fondest memories was when I was thirteen and my Dziadzi joined me."

Robin's parents, Tom and Donna Basarabski, still volunteer at the Dozynki, and the whole family has retained a number of Polish traditions. "We still observe Polish traditions such as sharing the Oplatki and enjoying Mazowsze at Christmas time," said Robin, who with her husband Mike have a daughter, Angie.



(From left) Robin, Angie and Mike

"Being a member of the Polish Heritage Society is a way for me to hold on to my heritage."

## PHS Seeks Candidates for 2023 Busia Queen

The Polish Heritage Society is now accepting applications from candidates for the sought-after position of Busia Queen, a year-long honor that is bestowed upon a lady who has at least one grandchild by Aug. 18.

An election will be held Aug. 27 during the end of the three-day Dozynki Polish Harvest Festival at the Calder Plaza in downtown Grand Rapids to

name the new Busia Queen, with festival goers casting ballots.

The lucky lady who is named Busia Queen will be crowned at the festival and presented with a ceremonial sash, which she will wear to represent the PHS at the Pulaski Days parade, the Wigilia dinner, Polish Heritage Night at the Griffins, Matka Boska Zielna service and one non-PHS sanctioned event of the winner's choosing. Two benefits of being named Busia Queen include a \$250 donation made on the win-

ner's behalf to the charity of her choice and a free annual membership to the society.

Those seeking to become Busia Queen must be present at the election on Aug. 27 to be eligible for the honor.

The PHS instituted the Busia Queen competition loosely based on an early tradition at the Dozynki festivals in rural Poland where the best woman harvester was named queen of the harvest. The lord of the manor would pre-

sent ceremonial gifts such as a wreath of grain to the queen, and the community would celebrate the harvest with feasts, music and dancing.

To be included as a candidate in the election, a woman needs to complete and return the application that is found on the PHS website <https://polishheritagesociety.com> under the menu item Festival, then Schedule of Events/Music and at

Patrick Puhalski is looking for a Polish language teacher that would be interested in taking on one pupil. His email is [puhalpat@aol.com](mailto:puhalpat@aol.com).  
Jan Choroszuca would like to learn how to play the accordion. If you are gifted in this area and would like to share your talent, please her email is [jchoroszuca@gmail.com](mailto:jchoroszuca@gmail.com).

Scott Kolany recently discovered some original documents that were his great grandparents when they came to the United States from Poland in 1907. He is looking for someone to help translate them. His email is [skolany@comcast.net](mailto:skolany@comcast.net).

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General Director Teresa Bonham was elected President, and Matthew Gryczan will rejoin the board as Recording Secretary after serving as General Director from 2019-2021. General Director Martin Rogalski was reelected to a second two-year term.

At the general meeting, Gryczan will give a presentation that sheds new light on the graceful monument at Holy Cross Cemetery of the Blessed Virgin Mary that commemorates the local men who fought for the reunification of Poland in World War I.

Since the cemetery didn't have any information on the monument, he launched a search of more than 50 hours through information sources

as varied as the archives of the Diocese of Grand Rapids to boxes of documents from local historian Eduard Adam Skendzel that he donated to the Grand Rapids Public Library. The most fruitful sources – issues of the Echo Polish weekly newspaper and minutes of cemetery board meetings – were written entirely in Polish that had to be translated.

In addition to sharing history, Gryczan will describe the current state of the monument and PHS plans to restore it to its former beauty.

Come join us for a picnic lunch and get to know members of the PHS better! Bring the Kids so they can enjoy the Splashpad and playground adjacent to the meeting pavilion.



*Polish Veterans Memorial at Holy Cross Cemetery*



*Oriole Park Splashpad*

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the bottom of the page "Busia Queen Application."

After downloading and completing the application, candidates can either mail a physical copy to the Polish Heritage Society of Grand Rapids, P.O. Box 1844, Grand Rapids MI 49501-1844 or email the completed application to [pshsgrandrapids@gmail.com](mailto:pshsgrandrapids@gmail.com). All entries must be received before midnight Aug. 18.



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**Annual Adult Membership \$20**

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**ONLINE**

You can join the Polish Heritage Society online by going to our website at <https://polishheritagesociety.com/>, filling out the Membership form and paying by using the PayPal Button.

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Fill out this form and send a personal check made out to the Polish Heritage Society to this address:

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