



POLISH HERITAGE SOCIETY OF GRAND RAPIDS

November 2020

PHS Helps Meijer Gardens with Szopka Building

By Matthew Gryczan

Teresa Bonham fondly remembers how her grandmother would gather the kids visiting her home on the morning of Christmas Eve and show them how to transform empty boxes, shiny wrapping paper and old Christmas ornaments into a glittering cardboard Szopka.

“We would wrap the boxes in foil, and tape them and glue them together to recreate the spires of a castle or Saint Mary’s Basilica in Krakow – where my grandmother Celia came from,” PHS director Bonham said. “It basically was like building with blocks. Sometimes our Szopka would be the

centerpiece at the kid’s table during the Wigilia.”

Thanks to the Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park and volunteers from the Polish Heritage Society such as Bonham, children and families in the metro Grand Rapids area can enjoy a virtual and hands-on experience of practicing this charming Polish tradition in December.

This is the first time that Meijer Gardens and the PHS have teamed up on Szopka building. During the past several years, Meijer Gardens has teamed with area schools to introduce hundreds of students to the history and tradition of handcrafting Szopka. Students have worked in cooperative



PHS Director Teresa Bonham displays components of a Szopka

Halls Continue to Make Progress With Grants, Dinners

By Matthew Gryczan

The 14 clubs in Grand Rapids with ties to Polish and Lithuanian heritage are making strides to shore up their finances after they lost their biggest annual moneymaker due to the COVID pandemic: Pulaski Days.

Thanks to government grants, drive-through dinners, slimmed down events and a “Save the Halls” campaign sponsored by the

Pulaski Days Committee, the halls and fraternal organizations generally look like they have a fighting chance to keep afloat until next year’s event.

Pulaski Days -- the week-long celebration of Polish/Lithuanian culture held every fall in Grand Rapids since 1973 -- was cancelled this year due to concerns about the possibility that the event may spread COVID-19 virus among

attendees and volunteers.

The biggest life preservers being thrown to the clubs are in the form of federal grants that are being administered by the Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce and audited and distributed by Kent County.

Omar Cuevas, vice president of sales and marketing at the Chamber, said four halls had been approved for a total of \$65,000 under the federal Coronavirus

Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act passed by Congress in March to offset the economic impacts of COVID-19. Grants given to small businesses can be used for payroll, utilities, and other operating expenses.

The four were the West Leonard Banquet Facility (Knights of Columbus at 1140 Muskegon Ave NW), \$20,000; St. Adalbert’s Aid Society (Fifth Street Hall), \$10,000; St. Isidore’s Be-

**Polish Heritage Society
of Grand Rapids
PO Box 1844
Grand Rapids MI
49501-1844**

[https://
polishheritagesociety.com](https://polishheritagesociety.com)

Email us at phsgrandrapids@gmail.com.

The Polish Heritage Society of Grand Rapids promotes an appreciation of the Polish and Lithuanian culture in the metro Grand Rapids. The Society publishes this newsletter monthly. We invite story ideas and content contributions. For more information, please contact Matthew Gryczan or Marilyn Lignell by writing to phsgrandrapids@gmail.com.

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Halls: Working to Keep Afloat

nevolent Aid Society (Diamond Avenue Hall), \$15,000; and Knights of St. Casimir Aid Society (6th Street Hall), \$20,000.

Mike Grabowski, president of Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Benevolent Society (Kosciuszko Hall), said last week his club also received a \$20,000 grant under the program.

Cuevas said his organization acts as an administrator for the grant money, using chamber volunteers with business and banking acumen to review applications from small businesses. Applications that meet criteria are then submitted to Kent County for verification and consideration. Money is then dispersed by the county.

“We are trying to save live-

lihoods, as well as lives,” said Cuevas, who has been working with 14th District Kent County Commissioner Carol Hennessy and others to help the clubs find money to keep operating.

The clubs also got some help from the six-week “Save the Halls” campaign launched by the Pulaski Days Committee, the umbrella organization that coordinates the efforts of halls and fraternal organizations that fund and put on the celebration.

Chairperson Michelle Kershner said the campaign raised more than \$15,000 that is being distributed equally to the 14 halls. The money was raised by contributions from organizations and individuals and the sale of clothing and

pins. As a gesture of solidarity with the halls, the PHS donated \$1,000 to the campaign.

“We are chipping away at the problem of lost revenue,” Kershner said.

In addition to outside help, the clubs have been selling take-out dinners and holding smaller events to bridge the financial gap. Jim Sepala, president of Diamond Avenue Hall, said his organization sold out of about 1,200 dinners on the Oct. 2-4 weekend, and Grabowski said his club did well by selling out of about 1,300 dinners that same weekend. Some organizations held small “pseudo Pulaski Days” celebrations such as “Falcon Fest” at Polish Falcons Hall and “Polish Patriot Days” at Eastern Avenue Hall.

Szopka: Hands-On Activity

groups using recycled materials and adornments to create a class Szopka to take back to their classrooms.

This year anyone interested in the tradition can either attend a webinar being held at 2 p.m. on Dec. 10 or participate in a Szopka Drop-In activity at Meijer Gardens to be held on Dec. 12 from noon to 3 p.m. More information can be found on the Events page of Meijer Gardens website. Check in advance for potential cancellation due to COVID restrictions. The drop-in activity is free with any paid admission to Meijer Gardens.

Seating to the drop-in event is limited. Meijer Gardens said it can accommodate 20 people at a time and open 2 classrooms for the drop-in activity with enough space to distance separate household members 6 feet apart.

“The education team at Meijer Gardens is excited to partner with the Polish Heritage Society this year to highlight holiday traditions celebrated by the Polish community in Grand Rapids,” said Charlie Fournier, Classroom Activities and Education Technology Coordinator. She said the Szopka

activities were an outgrowth of the Metro Health Christmas and Holidays Exhibition, which displays holiday traditions practiced around the world.

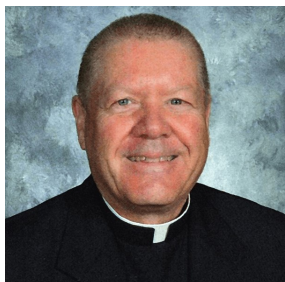
The PHS is asking members to contribute clean, empty shoeboxes, small boxes, thin round containers, and metal foil wrapping paper. They can be dropped off in an outside bin at 4170 Flamingo SW in Wyoming. Please do not drop off recyclables at Meijer Gardens.

In addition to information on Szopka, the webinar will address Wigilia dinner.

PHS Member News

By Marilyn Lignell

The next time that you see lifetime PHS member Father Tom (Kotowski) Simons, make sure that you give him a hearty congratulations on his retirement!



After he was granted senior priest status by the Diocese of Grand Rapids, Fr. Tom retired from his pastorate of Holy Trinity Catholic Church – Comstock Park on Oct. 12. Father Chris Rouech, formerly pastor of St. Pius X Catholic Parish, assumed the duties as pastor of Holy Trinity effective Oct. 13.

Fr. Tom entered St. Joseph's Seminary following his graduation from West Catholic High School in 1968, and he was ordained a priest in 1977. He received a master's degree in liturgy from the University of Notre Dame and authored the book "Holy People Holy Place" on rites of dedication for a church and altar.

During his 43 years of service throughout West Michigan, Fr. Tom tended to the needs of parishioners at St. Francis de Sales Catholic Church in Norton Shores, Holy Redeemer Parish in Jenison, as well as Holy Trinity. He also serves on the Governance Board/

Catholic Culture Committee for West Catholic.

Fr. Tom counts himself fortunate to have visited Poland in 1992, 2011 and last year. This past week has been a special remembrance for him. "November 11 was the 20th anniversary of my meeting Pope John Paul II and concelebrating morning Mass with him at the Vatican," he said. "That was a highlight of my life."

Frank's Market, longtime fixture on the Westside for quality meats, has become a corporate member. Fritz Stanitzek, owner who headed up the move to its new location last year, has been a longtime supporter of the PHS, often donating door prizes at our Wigilia dinners in December. He doubled his market's ca-



Fritz Stanitzek, owner of Frank's Market, shows new smoker.

capacity last month to smoke meat and sausage products as a way to prepare the business for the next generation. Fritz, third generation of the business established in 1933, is showing the ropes to fourth generation nephew Joe and son Mitchell.

The new smokers have computer controls to automate some of the process "but even with the automation, this isn't a good business if you aren't ambi-

tious. There is a lot of manual labor that goes into sausage making."

Life member Laura Szczepanek has taken advantage of the lull at That Polish Girl catering due to the pandemic to have knee surgery. Laura said she will miss being able to cook the PHS Wigilia meal cancelled due to COVID but "we have a year to sit back and think of exciting and fresh ideas for next year." Heal quickly, Laura!

Webinars Show How to Research Your Family History

There may not be a better time to dive into your Polish/Lithuanian roots from the comfort of your home, thanks to a series of 12 webinars offered in January, February and March that are conducted by professional Polish genealogists.

For a nominal fee, participants in the webinars can learn from six professional genealogists in Poland on how to research information as varied as cemetery records, finding your family history through land and mortgage registers, Polish censuses, online

data from the German partition, and Austrian Cadas-tral records.

The series sponsored by the Polish Genealogical Society of America, Polish-American Foundation of Connecticut and the Association of Polish Professional Genealogists

(Stowarzyszenie Polscy Profesjonalni Genealodzy) consists of double 1-hour sessions via ZOOM on the 2nd and 4th Saturdays of January, February and March, starting at noon EST.

The series is \$40 for participants who are not affiliated

with designated Polish genealogical societies. The series is \$20 for members of the Polish American Foundation, the Polish Genealogical Society of Michigan, the Polish Genealogical Society of America, and Polish Genealogical Society of Massachusetts.

For more details about the seminars and presenters and to register, visit:

<https://www.paf-welcomehome.org/2021-genealogy-lecture-series>. For more information on the Polish Genealogical Society of Michigan, visit: <https://www.pgsm.org>.

Join the Polish Heritage Society to receive our monthly newsletter and other benefits!

Annual Student Membership for full-time students through college \$5

Annual Adult Membership \$20

Annual Family or Business Membership \$35

Lifetime Membership \$150

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:

Polish Heritage Society of Grand Rapids

P.O. Box 1844

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