

## PHS Wigilia 2024 Draws Biggest Attendance Ever

By Matthew Gryczan

More than 100 people converged on the West Leonard

Banquet Facility on a clear Saturday night two weeks ago to participate in traditions

that Poles have observed for hundreds of years.

It was the annual PHS Wigilia, an event first launched in 1966 by the then-called Polish Arts Society to celebrate the Christmas season with the breaking of the opłatek wafer, specialty foods, Polish carols -- and each other.

The remarkable thing about the Wigilia held Dec. 7 is not only that it has continued for 58 years, but that it is on the upswing, due in large part to a committed small army of individuals who refuse to let the Polish traditions of Grand Rapids fade away.

"We had 103 people attend this year -- more than I've seen in the 20 years I've been doing this," said Marilyn Lignell, chair-

woman of Wigilia. "I think it's a combination of a better venue with lots of parking, a creative menu that keeps with the no-meat observance and added elegance with servers."

The dinner is held at former Knights of Columbus hall on Muskegon that is under the management of Laurie and Bob Sipka. Wigilia volunteers help devise the menu with a professional caterer, and the food is served to the tables rather than holding the dinner buffet style. Candles, real cloth napkins and matching glassware adorn each table.

While they are quick to point to the tangible improvements to Wigilia, the Wigilia volunteers soft pedal the real engine

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*Busia Queen Dolly Pelton was greeted by Past PHS president Jeff Portko dressed as Saint Nicholas at Wigilia*

## Detroit Polonia Group Enriched by Visit to Grand Rapids

For the first time in recent memory, a group of visitors from Detroit, Lansing and Kalamazoo visited Grand Rapids to learn more about the city's Polish heritage.

With an itinerary put together by the PHS, the Polish Institute of Culture & Research at Orchard Lake and the Polish Genealogical Society of Michigan chartered a bus and organized cars for a visit to Grand Rapids Dec. 7. Mid-morning, the group of 30 people arrived at St. Isidore's Church for a guided tour by Msgr. Edward Hankiewicz on the church's history and local

Polish heritage.

The next stop on the bus trip was a luncheon at the Polish National Aid Society/Jackson Street Hall, which is the oldest continuously operating Polish hall in the United States.

Hall president Anna Tylzynski spoke about the history of the hall and its role in Grand Rapids Polonia. Doug Preston, who heads up renovation of the hall, discussed his work and addressed the motivation for the project.

Following the luncheon, the

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*(from left) Anna Tylzynski receives an award of appreciation from Ania Bieciuk of Detroit*

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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 [phsgrandrapids@gmail.com](mailto:phsgrandrapids@gmail.com).

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for the resurgence – it's a labor of love.

It's the husband-wife teams of Lignell and her husband Dan, Mary Panek and her husband Rich, and individuals such as Stephanie Kovitz, Sharon Hanks, Jarek Kozal, Nick Palmer and Marc Mileski who make it all work. The work is leavened by the patronage of Msgr. Edward Hankiewicz.

None of the elegant touches came without effort. The 100 handmade Christmas ornaments at each seat of the tables were made from milkweed pods foraged from local fields by the Lignells and Paneks. They then hot glued the pods together, for decoration at an afternoon party at the Paneks home.

"The decorating party builds community within the PHS," Mary said. "It's a nice afternoon to get to know one another – kind of a welcoming thing."

## Share the Polish Tradition of Oplatek at Your Christmas Eve Dinner This Year

The first tradition observed at the PHS Wigilia dinner on Dec. 7 was the sharing of oplatek, where family and friends break off pieces of a thin unleavened bread wafer to share wishes of good will before sitting down to the feast.

There's no time like the present to start this custom if you don't celebrate it already.

Here is a list of locations that sold oplatek last year. It's recommended that you call ahead to check on availability:

Angelus Religious Goods,

Kovitz, who has been involved in decades of past Wigilia dinners, led the table setups the night before, ably aided by Hanks and others.

During dinner, volunteers explained each tradition as it took place. At the end of the meal, former PHS President Jeffrey Portko donned a St. Nicholas outfit to distribute candy canes to the audience, and the duo of Kozal and Palmer rounded out the evening by leading a koledy of Polish songs themed around the religious significance of Christmas.

"Honestly, I didn't go to a Wigilia dinner before my father Mitchell died," Lignell said. "It was only after that I got involved, helping my mother, Donna. Wigilia was something that my dad thought was important, and I realized how important carrying on tradition is after he passed.

"Now I can't image a time when the PHS wouldn't hold the Wigilia."

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group went to Holy Cross Cemetery, with PHS board member Matthew Gryczan as guide. Wearing a reproduction of a Polish Blue Army uniform from World War I, he talked about the local Polish immigrants who erected a monument at the cemetery to local men who fought in the Blue Army.

The tour then visited the grave of world champion middle-weight boxer Stanley Ketchel, where Gryczan gave the colorful story of the Grand Rapids native. At both the Soldiers Monument and the Ketchel monument, the institute's Associate Director for Polonia Affairs Ania Bieciuk lit a cemetery candle as a tribute.

The bus then capped off its trip with a stop at the Christkindl Market in downtown Grand Rapids.

A Spring PHS Bustrip to Detroit is being planned. Stay tuned!

641 Diamond Ave. NE, phone (616) 776-0450, oplatek available during store hours T-Sat., 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Holy Spirit Church, 2230 Lake Michigan Drive NW, phone (616) 453-6369; oplatek available at the parish office open on weekdays, call ahead due to varying hours at the office.

Sacred Heart of Jesus Church, 151 Garfield Ave SW, phone (616) 459-8362, oplatek available at the parish office at 156 Valley, office hours are M-F. 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m.

St. Adalbert Basilica and St. James, 654 Davis Ave NW, phone (616) 458-3065, oplatek available

after Masses during the weekend and at the back of church during weekdays from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., (access the church through the handicapped entrance).

St. Anthony of Padua, 2510 Richmond Street NW, Grand Rapids, MI 49504, phone (616) 453-8229, office hours T-Fri. 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

St. Isidore Church, 628 Diamond Ave. NE, phone 459-4731, oplatek available after Masses on the weekend or at the parish office at 625 Spring during the weekdays, M-F 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.



# PHS Membership News



By Marilyn Lignell

On behalf of myself and the board members of the PHS, we would like to wish all of you a very Merry Christmas!

Having an opportunity to keep track of membership has given me the privilege to interact and get to know a lot of you. Our society has been growing for the last couple of years, and this gives us the opportunity to do more activities and fulfill our mission to preserve, foster and perpetuate traditional customs and culture of our Polish Heritage.

I am proud of our accomplishments in 2024. A few highlights that I particularly enjoyed was a bus trip to Chicago, a successful Dozynki Polish Festival, the PHS awarding \$6,000 in scholarship monies to exceptional students of Polish descent, our yearly dedication to preserving the importance of Matka Boska and Wigilia and our partnership with the family of Stanley Ketchel to restore his monument at Holy Cross Cemetery.

With a special thanks to PHS President Teresa Bonham, we held General Membership meetings at St. Isidore's and Sacred Heart of Jesus churches where Msgr. Edward Hankiewicz and Father Ron Floyd provided guided tours to help us to appreciate the role that the

parishes played in settling Polish immigrants in Grand Rapids. And we shouldn't forget our annual Polish Heritage Night at the Griffins, which is always well attended.

I am proud of our society and excited to see what 2025 has in store for us.

One thing is for sure: everyone is interested in Polish cooking, so we will be looking at ways to sponsor and partner with other organizations to offer more classes in Polish cuisine. We are also looking to launch a Polish language club, where we meet monthly in a relaxed environment to practice basic Polish words and phrases – no experience necessary!

Speaking of cuisine, the Wigilia dinner on Dec. 7 turned out to be a great opportunity for me to connect faces with names. At the dinner I was able to chat with new member Andy Kosiorek, who decided to join since his mother had been a member for many years.

Also attending our Wigilia Dinner were new members Anne Marie Stokes of Southfield and Francie Allagreen from St. Clair Shores. They came with their husbands all the way from the East side and made a day of it by going to the Christkindl Market before dinner.

Diane Lorenski and Matt Szulcalowski joined as new members, and Pulaski Days Committee joined as a lifetime member. Our final new member is Stephen Kozal, who was gifted his membership from his Aunt Teresa Bonham.

Take a lesson from Teresa and give PHS memberships to family and friends! Every year we are becoming more active in



*It was all smiles at the Chrusciki making class held Dec. 7 at the Son's & Daughters Club, organized by Marzana Butryn.*

the community, and there are a number of benefits that come with your membership: our monthly newsletter The Echo and discounts at Sobie Meats, Franks Market, Lewandoskis Market and Pienky Polish Pottery Store. Members will

have up to date information about our Grand Rapids Polish/Lithuanian community.

Regarding memberships, please have your 2025 membership renewals in by February 28, and have a Happy New Year!

## Polish Heritage Night at the Griffins on Jan. 31

The PHS has a block of 175 seats at Van Andel Arena for Polish Heritage Night at a Griffins hockey game.

This year Polish Heritage Night is Jan. 31 when the Griffins play the Colorado Eagles at 7 p.m.

To sit in the PHS section, you must buy tickets through the Griffins box office using this link:

<https://griffinshockey.eventue.net/promotions/POLISH>.

The link is also posted on the PHS Facebook page. A portion of the sales purchased through this link will be donated to the PHS.

Tickets to the event are \$30, and the game is a Friday special with \$2 hot dogs and \$2 beers.

The Malbork Dance group is scheduled to perform on the concourse, and it's rumored that Busia Queen Dolly Pelton will try her hand at driving the Zamboni.





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.

#### **MAIL**

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

Grand Rapids MI 49501-1844

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