

Char Czarnecki is Lifelong Supporter of Grand Rapids Polish Community

By Richard Panek and Teresa Bonham

Char Czarnecki could be, by most accounts, considered the Leading Lady of the Westside. She can often be spotted at many Polish Hall events such as breakfasts, fish fries, pub crawls, PHS & Pulaski Days meetings, and cooking classes, just to name a few. Her vibrant personality and extensive social network make for lively company in any setting, whether it is a Polish hall or PHS business meeting or an event celebrating Grand Rapids' Polish heritage.

Showing pride in this heritage began at a very young age for Char when she took traditional Polish folk-dance lessons and participated in recitals under the instruction of Mrs. DeGraff at the Lexicon Club and Jackson St Hall. The daughter of Bernard and Constance (Walczewski) Hess, she graduated Catholic Central high school (1960) then MSU fol-

lowed by a Masters from Wayne State University. She worked as a teacher for the GRPS for 35 years.

Char met her husband Bob Czarnecki at a cousin's wedding reception and they married in 1967. Bob was in the U.S. Army Reserves attaining the rank of Command Sergeant Major and was also PHS president for many years. Char's son Kevin graduated from the West Point Military Academy where he played as linebacker for the Army football team. She has two granddaughters who currently attend the University of Georgia and University of Oklahoma.

Promoting pride in Polish heritage is one of Char's passions. Together with Bob, Tom Uzariski, George Rosinski and many others, they started a Polish Art & Culture display at the Grand Rapids Festival of the Arts in the 70's. This little exhibit eventually developed into what is now the Polish Dozynki Festival,

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Char Czarnecki at this years Dozynki Festival preparing herbs and flowers to make the traditional Polish folk style headdress known as Wianek.

Polish All Saints and All Souls Day Traditions and Remembering Our Loved Ones

By Paulette Longwell

All Saints Day (November 1) is a public holiday in Poland where people take time to pay respect to relatives who have died. A few days before "Dzień Wszystkich Świętych," the grave sites of ancestors and other family members will be cleaned up. From that time through All Souls Day, flowers and candles are laid on the

graves in remembrance, and prayers are offered for the beloved departed. Even the graves of strangers are cleaned when it is obvious no one has visited to pay their respects. These occasions are often times for family members to reconnect and have a meal together after going to the cemetery.

The long-standing Catholic faith of the country dating back to

966 AD, and history of recent centuries of tragic oppression, places great value in respecting the dignity of the dead. The Catholic faith teaches that the human body is considered a temple of the Holy Spirit, and the Church emphasizes respect for it after death. Burying the dead in a sacred place honors this dignity, encourages prayer for the

deceased, and fosters community remembrance. Past Polish partitions by neighboring enemies, as well as the tragic loss of six to seven million Poles in the two World Wars, are other reasons for the Polish holiday.

During a trip to Poland in 2023, my sister Lori Peterson and I visited the Municipal

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Polish Heritage Society of Grand Rapids

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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 Richard Panek or Marilyn Lignell by writing to: phsgrandrapids@gmail.com

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the longest running ethnic festival in our city. With time, Bob and Char Czarnecki were recognized for their contributions to the Polish community by being named the Polish Heritage Society's Citizens of the year in 2005. The next year, Bob was named the Grand Marshall of the Pulaski Days Parade.

Char has always enjoyed working with youth. For years she has organized the children's tent during festival, teaching arts and crafts including the ever-popular floral headpieces (wianki). This year, the PHS Board voted to rename the tent the Char Czarnecki Children's Tent to honor her work in this area.

Char can be described as a true philanthropist. Philanthropy in Greek means "love of humanity" and this love is manifested in the



Handing down traditions to the next generation at festival.



Char Czarnecki stands in front of the new PHS storage trailer made possible with her generous donation

giving of time, talent and treasure to one's community.

Besides giving her time and talents working at Polish cultural events, Char expresses this love financially as well. Although a graduate of Grand Rapids Catholic Central high school, her son attended West Catholic where she started two scholarships for West Catholic students.

The Bob "Sarge" & Charlene Czarnecki Fund scholarship is for students of Polish or Lithuanian descent and a family history of military service. The Captain Kevin Czarnecki scholarship is open to any student.

Due to her history of decades of support to the West Catholic community, Char will be given the Falcon by Choice Award for 2025 which will be presented at the annual West Catholic Awards Night Dinner on Octo-

ber 22nd.

When there is a need in the Polish community, Char is willing to support the right cause. When the Malbork Polish youth dancers were raising money for new folk costumes, Char helped them meet their goal. When the Polish Heritage Society needed a new trailer to store supplies for festival this year, Char made that possible. She also actively contributes to the Polish Falcons Hall as a member of the Ladies Auxiliary where husband Bob served as President for 30 plus years.

The Polish Heritage Society is grateful for everything she has done to promote, celebrate and share her Polish heritage. The next time you see Char about town, make sure to say "Dziękuję!" to thank her for supporting our Polish community in Grand Rapids.

Copernicus Center for Polish Studies in Ann Arbor Hosting Polish Film Events

The Copernicus Center at the University of Michigan along with the Polish Cultural Fund and Ann Arbor, Michigan Theater are presenting the 32nd Ann Arbor Polish Film Festival Fri, Nov 14-Sun, Nov 16. For a listing of the

films and screening times go to annarborpolishfilmfestival.com.

On Mon, Dec 1, 5—6:30 pm there will also be a Copernicus Center roundtable: *Polish Cinema in the 20th and 21st Centuries: From the*

Centers to the Margins by Elzbieta Durys and Magdalena Zdrodowska, Copernicus visiting fellows. Room 555 Weiser Hall. Visit umich.edu/polish/events for details.

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Cemetery in Tomaszów Lubelski, known as the “new” cemetery. We were accompanied by some of the newfound relatives discovered by doing some in-depth family genealogic research ahead of our trip.

We visited the graves of my great grandparents, three of my grandfather’s siblings (Stanisława Bielak, Paulina Dubiel, and Bolesław Raczkiewicz) and a few others. My grandfather and his siblings Joseph and Mary were buried in the United States. Research disclosed that his brother Piotr was buried in Podhajce, Lublin Voivodeship, Poland. His brother Jan was buried in Gniezno, Greater Poland Voivodeship, Poland. His brother Franciszek, killed by Germans in Zamość, was buried in an unknown location. The visit to Tomaszów Lubelski was moving and inspired us to continue the care for our deceased loved ones in Grand Rapids.

Burials in my family at Holy Cross Cemetery in Grand Rapids, Michigan span over 100 years. The 55-acre cemetery is located next to West Catholic High School just west of the



Newfound Polish Relatives

Football Stadium. Founded in 1909, it is one of five Catholic Cemeteries run by the Diocese of Grand Rapids. Its name was changed in 1947 from the Polish Catholic Cemetery to Holy Cross Cemetery.

The most recent family member of mine to be buried at the cemetery was Thomas Peterson (my brother-in-law) in 2019. The first ones were Klementyna (Golebiowska) Raczkiewicz (my grandfather Anthony Raczkiewicz’s first wife) and Bronisława, their

child, both buried in 1918.

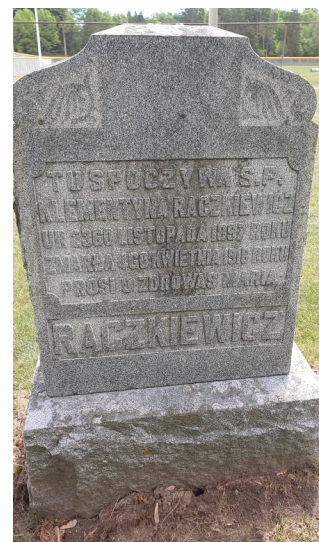
Anthony and Klementyna were both from the same area of Poland – she was born in the city of Tomaszów Lubelski and he was born in the nearby village of Sabaudia. They married on June 20, 1916 at Sacred Heart Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan and lived on the Northwest side.

Anthony and Klementyna had a daughter, Bronisława, born on April 1, 1918 in Bay City, Michigan. After the delivery, the small family immediately returned to Grand Rapids where Klementyna passed away 3 days later from complications of childbirth. Anthony and Klementyna had been married less than two years.

Bronisława was brought to the D.A. Blodgett Children’s Home in Grand Rapids for medical care on June 15, two and a half months after her birth. Sadly, after a month at the Children’s Home, she died there on July 12 from a congenital heart problem. She was three months and 12 days old. The deaths of Klementyna and Bronisława were two of the 108 listed in the records of St.

Adalbert Church that year.

Klementyna and Bronisława were both buried at The Polish Catholic Cemetery. The tombstone for Klementyna is large compared to the more modest ones for the family in future years.



The gravestone for Klementyna Raczkiewicz

The monument had a cross which has broken off and is missing. The tombstone reads in Polish, “Here rests in peace, Klementyna Raczkiewicz, born 23 November 1897, died 4 April 1918, She asks for Hail Mary’s.” My mother Shirley Longwell remembers there also was a small stone nearby for her baby, Bronisława that unfortunately, is no longer visible.

Respecting and carrying-on the devout Polish traditions of caring for the dead, my Mother and our family members still tend to family gravesites in the cemetery.

No matter what your ethnic background, take pride in your ancestry, and visit the final resting place of your loved ones and friends at the beginning of November. Someone will appreciate it.



Candlelight illuminates the grave markers on the Polish holiday at night.

Polish Heritage Society Membership News and Events

By Marilyn Lignell

Hello members. The Polish Heritage Society welcomes three new members this month. Rose Scheller joined as an annual member.



Rose Scheller

If you were fortunate to be at Dozynki when she sang the American and Polish National Anthems you were treated to an amazing rendition.

Also joining as an annual member is Rosalie Haduch. Rosalie turned 90 this year. Rosalie was born in Poland and wrote a book *Rosalie: A Young Girl's Perspective of World War II in Poland*. "The innocence of a child against the backdrop of war can only be genuinely shared by one who has lived through it. Anyone can enjoy the tale where the heart teaches that despite the worst kind of sorrow can come a magnitude of love." My mom, Donna Mileski, met Rosalie at her assisted living home and gave her the membership as a birthday gift. I can attest that Rosalie lives by her positive spirit, she is always smiling!

Also joining PHS as a lifetime member is Tracy Piasecki. Tracy's first interaction with PHS was through the late Ruth Ann Lomas. "We both bonded over many things, including our Polish Heritage," Tracy said. Tracy is married to Ben Lawrence and they have four adult children—27, 26, 23 and 19. Tracy chose to keep her last name when she married as she is the only descendant of her Grandpa Ed Piasecki's grandchildren with the Piasecki surname. "There are quite a few Piasecki folks in the Muskegon area, in fact, my family is responsible for starting the Muskegon Polish Festival."

Tracy feels that it is important to continue her connection with her heritage in as many ways as possible by taking Polish language classes, visiting Poland and getting involved with the Polish diaspora in West Michigan. "I feel like there was a reason Ruth Ann came into my life and I want to honor her connection to the Polish Heritage Society. It feels like being connected to a part of her." Tracy is currently in private practice as a psychotherapist in Spring Lake at Isabel's House.



Tracy Piasecki

On a solemn note, the PHS offers our condolences to lifetime member Mary Beth Rardin on the death of her husband Gerald (Jerry) on September 9, 2025. He is survived by Mary Beth, children; Teresa, Anita and Jeff, six grandchildren, fourteen great grandchildren, numerous nieces and nephews, sister Carol Welton, brother-in-law Ron Sakalowski, sister-in-law Loretta Rardin. Jerry was a member of St. Isidore Church, St. Stanislaus Aid Society, Polish Heritage Society and American Legion Post 0047.



Peter Dobek PhD

To celebrate October as Polish Heritage Month, the PHS is presenting a lecture by historian Dr. Peter Paul Dobek for the October General Membership Meeting. Dr. Dobek will present the fascinating history of 15th century pubs, inns and alehouses in Krakow, Poland. Plan to attend Sunday, October 19th at Noon. The meeting takes place at Son's and Daughter's Club, 1057 Hamilton Ave NW, Grand Rapids. PHS will be providing a main course for lunch and members are free to bring a dish to pass.

It is time to start thinking about joining the PHS at our annual Wigilia Dinner. This year's Wigilia Dinner will be held Dec 13 at West Michigan Banquet Facility, 1140 Muskegon NW, formally the Knights of Columbus 3104 Hall. Included in the nine-course meal is the sharing of the oplatek, a program that explains some of the Polish traditions at Christmastime, and a sung Polish kolendy. The dinner has evolved slightly but the premise remains the same—the meal is meatless but that doesn't mean tasteless! For the third year in row, Krystal Maynard with Krystal Palace catering will be using traditional Polish recipes along with some fresh takes on authentic eastern European dishes. Krystal will be joined by her sister and mom this year adding a special touch to meal preparation. Please see the order form enclosed to get your reservation in!

We also make handmade ornaments for all the guests to take home and you are invited to participate in making them. The Wigilia Committee will hold a crafting session on Saturday, November 15, from 10 a.m.-2 p.m. at the home of Rich and Mary Panek, 6620 Knockadoon Dr., Rockford, MI 49341. A brunch will be served. Please reply to Mary Panek marylpanek@gmail.com or 616.550.4113. Space is limited to 20 guests.

The Grand Rapids Public Museum is having their annual Cultural Heritage Festival on Saturday, November 8, from 10 a.m.-4 p.m. This special day is a vibrant celebration of community, featuring music, dancing, and hands-on activities. The PHS will be there with a booth and we would love to see you!