

## Gary Szotko Named 2024 Polish Citizen of the Year

By Matthew Gryczan.

From circling the food trucks on Saturdays on Walker Avenue to supporting the restoration of Valley Field, Gary Szotko is always in the thick of making things better for the community at large.

As a token of appreciation for all he has done for more than 30 years, the Polish Heritage Society has named Szotko as its Polish Citizen of the Year in 2024. He will be presented with a plaque to commemorate the honor at 7 p.m. Aug. 23 at the Dozynki Festival to be held at the Calder Plaza.

“Gary has always been one of those ‘Go To’ guys when it comes to helping out on the West Side,” PHS President Teresa Bonham said. “As a firefighter for the city of Grand Rapids, he protected lives and property when disaster struck. As small business owner, he has been a longtime supporter of the PHS and the community in general. We are absolutely pleased to be giving Gary this award.”

Szotko, 62, served in the

Grand Rapids Fire Department for 27 years, rising to the position of deputy fire chief. He switched careers in June of 2018 when he bought Lewandoski’s Meat Market, a business originally established in 1923 by Wencel Rymerowicz that was later renamed when it was taken over by Ray Lewandoski in 1948. Now Szotko and his brother Roger own and operate the meat market.

“My brother and I are foodies, so we started Food Truck Saturdays, when each Saturday during the summer we have other local food vendors park their trucks nearby or cook in the back parking lot,” Szotko said. “It’s a way to support small local businesses and also introduce new foods to the neighborhood.”

The recent movement to restore and update Valley Field also has struck a chord in Szotko’s heart. Szotko’s business is a sponsor of the Fans of Valley Field, which describes itself as “a grassroots effort to restore and revitalize a precious gem of a field, located on the



Gary Szotko in front of Lewandoski’s Market

WestSide of Grand Rapids, Michigan - Sullivan Field (originally named Valley Field).”

“We didn’t know it when we started to get involved, but my grandfather John Szotko was laid off from his job at a furniture factory, and during that time he helped to build the original Valley Field,” Szotko

said. “And we’ve all played baseball there as kids. So it was only natural for us to support the effort.”

In addition to his work with the community, Szotko has been a stalwart supporter of the Polish Heritage Society by donating foods for events.

### Get Ready for 2024 PHS Dozynki Festival August 23-25 at Calder Plaza

You can start laying out your best red duds for the upcoming Dozynki Festival in August and show your Polish pride.

Or better yet, get on the Polish Heritage Society website and become part of the festival yourself as a volunteer!

If you ask any volunteer whether it’s fun and worth his or her time, you’d get a resounding “Tak!” No experience is necessary to lend a hand, and there are plenty of opportunities to sign up for something that suits your fancy. Just visit the PHS website, click on the Festival

tab and click on Sign Up to Help.

Regardless of which side of the token counter you choose, one thing is for certain: it’s fun for all when you check the boxes. Live music, check. Great food and beverages, check. Children’s tent, check. Contests,

check. Vendors with items you won’t find elsewhere, check. Meeting new people, check.

Free admission, double check!

As the longest running ethnic  
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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 Matthew Gryczan, Richard Panek or Marilyn Lignell by writing to [phsgrandrapids@gmail.com](mailto:phsgrandrapids@gmail.com).

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festival in Grand Rapids, Dozynki has established a reputation for being a fun, family friendly event that showcases Polish culture, featuring live music and a large dance area, a children's tent, vendors offering Polish cuisine and items, and a tent that explains local Polish-American history and the contributions of famous Polish-Americans.

Other fun activities during the festival include the paczki eating contest, crowning of the Busia Queen and a performance by the P.R.C.U.A. Malbork Dance Ensemble, a dance group for youth ages 3-18 that teaches traditional Polish folk dances with authentic garb.

Let's look over the lineup of Polka music, probably the happiest music in the universe.

Friday

1 to 5 p.m.: Virgil Baker's Just For Fun Band

6 p.m. to 10 p.m. (Close): Box On

Saturday

Noon to 5 p.m.: Bruce Packard Band

5 p.m. to 10 p.m. (Close) Gerry Kaminski's Polka Network, alternating with Box On

Sunday

Noon to 4:30 p.m. (Close) Tony Blazonczyk and New Phaze Band

Other new activities this year include a live demonstration by artist Maria Bereza on the art of coloring eggs for special occasions such as Easter and Christmas, and a booth manned by the Polish Genealogical Society of Michigan to share practical advice on how to research your family's Polish heritage. Established in 1978, the society's mission is to promote and encourage research in Polish genealogy as well as preservation of historical materials which aid in the documentation of family histories. With about 400 members, the society offers webinars, an annual seminar, a journal, a newsletter, and databases of genealogy information.

There also will be a live demonstration by Polish cookbook author Anna Hurning, who last year served up a delicious batch of chilled beetroot soup topped with hardboiled eggs.

## Polish Sausage Workshop

The Polish Heritage Society is sponsoring a free class on how to make Polish fresh sausage, taught by internationally known cookbook author and blogger Anna Hurning, at 4 p.m. Wednesday, Aug. 21 at St Adalbert's Fraternal Aid Society (5th Street Hall), 701 5th St NW.

PHS President Teresa Bonham, who organized the class with 2nd Vice President Mike Kozal, said the class will walk through the prep before making the sausage, talk about spices used and present the technique of preparing and cooking this traditional fresh Polish sausage.

"We'll finish the presentation by cooking and tasting the sausage on the spot," she said.

The event is free, but participants must reserve a spot to attend. To make a reservation, please email Bonham at [teresabonham@gmail.com](mailto:teresabonham@gmail.com). Space is limited.

Hurning's cookbooks and merchandise from the Piękny Polish Pottery Store will also be available for purchase at the demonstration.

## Matka Boska Zielna Mass is August 14th at St. Isidore Church

The annual Matka Boska Zielna Mass will be held at St. Isidore Church, 625 Spring Ave. NE, at 7 p.m. Monday, Aug. 14.

Monsignor Edward Hankiewicz will lead the service that is a traditional favorite for local Catholics: a Mass with a blessing of flowers and herbs, music sung in Polish, and a procession to and crowning of a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the church courtyard.

In Poland, Matka Boska is celebrated at the Feast of Our Lady of Greens, when herbs are blessed and then woven into wreaths that are hung near holy pictures and used as medicinal recipes as protection against illness and natural disasters.

The PHS is an active sponsor of the celebration, providing flowers, herbs and the woven crown for Mary and refresh-

ments at the reception. In past years, the Pulaski Queen and her Court and the Malbork Dance Ensemble of Grand Rapids have attended.

Anyone who would like to volunteer to help for Matka Boska by way of setting up tables 2 hours prior to the event for the reception, bringing cookies or baked goods, and clean up afterwards should contact Marilyn Lignell at [phsgrandrapids@gmail.com](mailto:phsgrandrapids@gmail.com).

# PHS Membership News



By Marilyn Lignell

As we put June in the record books and move into July, it's always a reminder how the Polish Heritage Society follows the seasons like the calendar. We held our annual general membership meeting and installation of new officers in June, and we are now moving full steam ahead on preparations for the Dozynki Festival!

We'd be amiss to mention the new board without recognizing the contributions of outgoing officers. On behalf of the society and its entire membership, I'd like to extend a heartfelt and appreciative *Dziękuję* to two board members who rotated out of their seats in June to make room for other individuals to serve: former 2nd Vice President Anthony Zasuwa and former Corresponding Secretary Elena Chaidez.

Both individuals have given untold hours of their time to make the Polish Heritage Society the vibrant organization that it is today. While her bylines are small, Elena's posts on Facebook as the website's editor have played a huge role in keeping PHS members up to date

on happenings in the organization and news about Polish heritage in general. In addition to her role in maintaining the PHS Facebook page, Elena is one of those individuals who has always raised her hand to help cater food or promote an event.

Anthony first served as a director for about 4 years, then worked as 2nd Vice President for 6 years. He has volunteered on the Dozynki committees handling food vendors, token exchange, and Busia Queen contest. In addition, he has helped to coordinate Matka Boska at St. Isidore's Church and organized the Polish-American Night at the Griffin's.

In addition to installation of officers, the general meeting held June 9 featured a rollicking review of the history of St Isidore's Roman Catholic Church given by Monsignor Ed Hankiewicz and the personal introduction of some of the recipients of the PHS scholarships.

Monsignor Ed Hankiewicz, whose family came from German occupied Poland, shared the history and evolution of the parish and stories about some of the personalities who formed it. When it was first established in 1897, the church was located in the space where the rectory is now, north of the church. There was a church, school and the nuns resided "in the attic" until an appropriate building could be constructed, he said.

Construction was based on pay-as-you go – without a mortgage, the parish built the church as they raised funds. Much of the church remains today how it was built original-

ly, except for some updates such as the location of the baptismal font and carpeting.

Scholarship winners Regina Mondro and Genevieve Nickels took time at the meeting to say thank you to the society for aiding them financially with their studies. As a real-life example of how our scholarships make a long lasting effect, Genevieve was joined by her mother Amanda Nickels (Kwiatkowski), who was a 1992 recipient of a PHS scholarship. Amanda earned her bachelor's degree in teaching from Grand Valley State University and has been a teacher for 28 years at St. Mary's Visitation parish in Byron Center.



*Genevieve and Amanda*

Former PHS president Adam Porczynski made headlines when he was honored with a Citizen of the Year at the Grand Rapids Asian-Pacific Festival for his dedication and help in developing and initiating their first festival in 2017.

Ace Marasigan, the organization's founder and CEO, approached Adam in 2016 with an idea to launch the festival as a way to add to the diversity of metro Grand Rapids and rally people to do amazing things in the community. Ad-

am responded by investing many hours into establishing the festival, now in its seventh year with its signature Dragon Boat Race.

One of the best things about making family dinners is that you get a chance to talk to others while you cook. Here's your chance to cook and speak Polish!

PNAS Jackson Street Hall is hosting a Polish language and cooking class running five weeks starting July 13, when participants will learn basic greetings in Polish while they make Nalesniki (crepes) with fresh fruit filling. The classes are led by Polish Heritage Society Busia Queen Lucy Maciejewski Preston and local Polish language instructor Marzanna Butryn.

The two-hour long classes on consecutive Saturdays will then delve into frequently used Polish words and techniques for making Lazanki (noodles, cabbage and bacon), Placki Ziemniaczane (potato pancakes) Kluski Slaskie (Silesian dumplings), and Szarlotka (apple cake).

Cost of the classes is \$30 for adults and \$15 for children, with a price break extended for more than one child.

For more details on times and location, please call PNAS Jackson Street Hall at (616) 774-9011 or e-mail Marzanna at [butryanmarzanna@gmail.com](mailto:butryanmarzanna@gmail.com) or Lucy at [Impres-ton0246@gmail.com](mailto:Impres-ton0246@gmail.com).



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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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