

Ridgewood *Living*



TARA MASTERSON

HAPPY TO BE HERE

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Getting ready for a patriotic dessert.



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BY KATHRYN SCHMIDT | PHOTOS BY JANET JOYNER PHOTOGRAPHY



Tara with her seven nephews at the 4th of July parade in 2022. PHOTO BY CASEY MASTERSON.



A wedding cake by Cakes by T. PHOTO BY CASEY MASTERSON.

One of Ridgewood's most revered and celebrated events is our annual Fourth of July celebration. From the flag raising ceremony in the morning, to the drums and bugles of the parade, to the powerful display of evening fireworks, July 4 is a glorious day. Behind it all, tirelessly working throughout the year to organize and host this privately funded and managed event, is the Ridgewood Fourth of July Celebration Committee and its current President, Tara Masterson.

"Ridgewood has so many great traditions, but the Fourth of July has always been my favorite. Growing up, my parents would throw big get-togethers and we would pray for good weather for the fireworks. My lifelong friend Leigh Gilsean Saltiel and her family would join us, so when Leigh and I were invited to join the committee in 2012, we were thrilled to help continue this great tradition that created memories for the past 114 years and, we hope, for many more to come." Tara makes a point to thank the volunteers, partners, sponsors and private donors who make the tradition possible. The committee is not part of the village government and receives no funding from the village, so if you enjoy the celebration, buy a ticket to Vet's Field for the evening's entertainment and fireworks, or consider volunteering or donating to "Support the Tradition." (ridgewoodjuly4th.com)

Tara's volunteer spirit goes beyond the 4th. She is also the Event Coordinator for

the Forget Me Not Foundation (FMN; fmnfoundation.com) whose biannual event, "An Evening to Remember," will be held on October 25. Tara's sister and brother-in-law, Melissa and Dave Barry, established the foundation in memory of their second child, Emma Grace, who was born still. FMN helps families who have lost babies during pregnancy, birth, or shortly after birth by providing bereavement support, education for hospital staff and first responders, and a memory box so families can bring home remembrances of their babies. FMN currently supports 100 hospitals nationwide.

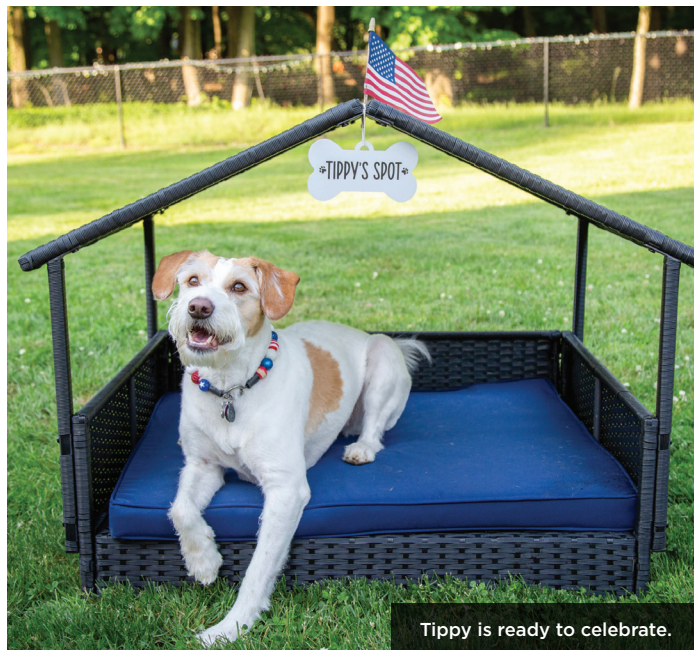
By day, Tara is the master baker behind Cakes by T (cakesbyt.com). Tara had been baking cakes for family and friends for years as a hobby. Then in 2021, New Jersey eliminated its ban on the sale of cottage industry home-baked goods, so Tara decided the time was right to secure her home baker permit and pursue what made her happy. Cakes by T specializes in custom cakes and cupcakes, combining Tara's culinary and creative skills. Are you looking for orange, pink, and blue unicorns? Piece of cake! "Give me an idea, or an idea of an idea, and I can make it happen," she declares. "But taste is also critical. I want everything to be fresh, so my cakes are made within 24 to 48 hours of delivery. I generally use American buttercream icing, and if I need to use fondant, I make it from scratch." Children's birthday cakes are a particular specialty. Tara loves the joy on

a kid's face when they see a cake featuring their favorite character or activity.

How did it start? "When I was a little girl," Tara shares, "I received a Fischer Price Kitchen as a special gift. Then I got my first KitchenAid mixer when I was 14." After graduating from Ridgewood High School in 2003, she received an Associate's Degree in culinary arts from Johnson & Wales University in Providence. She then transferred to Fairleigh Dickinson University, earning a Bachelor's Degree in hospitality management and securing an internship at the historic Don CeSar Hotel, the "Pink Palace" of St. Petersburg, Florida. After sampling all aspects of the restaurant industry --- serving, cooking, and bartending --- Tara landed at The Melting Pot in Westwood where she worked for ten years in positions of increasing responsibility, eventually becoming General Manager and the corporate trainer for new store openings from Boston to Florida. She paraphrases Rachel Ray saying, "I have cooking in my heart, but I'm a waitress in my soul."

The hospitality business is demanding with long hours including weekends and holidays. So, after 12 years, Tara looked for a new challenge --- and somewhat more convenient hours. She capitalized on her skills in customer service and problem solving by joining the Customer Advocacy Team at Mercedes Benz USA, quickly becoming a Team Leader and

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Tippy is ready to celebrate.

then a Customer Retention Specialist responsible for the most challenging customer service cases. A highlight was visiting Mercedes' global customer service center in the Netherlands and their production plant in Alabama where she drove on their racetrack, pushing 110mph. When Mercedes moved from Montvale to Atlanta in 2019, Tara chose to not relocate but she continued working remotely until those changes in cottage industry laws allowed her to pursue her passion for culinary arts on her own schedule.

Well, not entirely her own. Tara is lucky to have her immediate family nearby and Tippy, a four-year-old wire-haired terrier mix pup, at home. Tippy loves treats, long walks, road trips, children, and other dogs and has traveled extensively, even staying at Disney World for a few nights. "I adopted Tippy through Real Dog Rescue in Mahwah," shares Tara, "a fantastic organization if you are looking to bring a furry family member into your home." Tippy followed Tully, a Labrador Pitbull mix who passed away in 2021 after a brief illness. Tara's love of dogs, and a good walk, inspired her to add personalized dog walking and sitting to her professional services. Typically she works with only one dog at a time. "I remember being stressed about who would take care of my dogs whenever I traveled so I hope to help alleviate people's anxiety about leaving their pets. I welcome them into my home as my own. Often, it's a vacation for the dog as well!" she quips.

Tara is a proud aunt to seven nephews ranging in age from two to sixteen. During covid, she and her sister began a Sunday dinner tradition that continues to this day. Tara often introduces foods that the boys might not regularly have, like fondue and homemade Japanese ramen. She also takes requests which have included a full Chinese buffet with dumplings made from scratch. "Dumplings," she advises, "take time and effort. So I make a huge batch and freeze them." She contends that nothing beats homemade baguettes fresh from the oven and she is embracing the sourdough trend that is taking hold. One of her favorite moments is when everyone sits down and starts eating and it gets really quiet. Then she knows that the dinner or cake is really good!

Tara has also taken up gardening and finds it rewarding to grow and pick her own herbs and vegetables for simple, sustainable, and delicious dinners. She admits to not having a green thumb but is lucky to get advice from friends and clients in the Women Gardeners of Ridgewood Club. She counts their bi-annual garden tour as another Ridgewood tradition that should not be missed.

Tara considers her Lakeview Drive neighborhood a unique hidden Ridgewood gem, tucked away on a dead-end that leads to King's Pond. "When I moved here in 2011," she notes, "having bought the 1922 house from the original owners' family, I was the youngest person on the block. Now a whole new generation is

moving in and there are always children playing outside who often stop by asking to pet Tippy or for a cupcake."

Like most New Jersey natives, Tara loves the Jersey Shore and heads to Beach Haven every summer with her sister's family. Naturally, they have a Mussel Monday and Taco Tuesday tradition. And everything comes full circle. She recalls her brother spending one 4th of July weekend at the shore with his friends, but calling Tara to pick him up, realizing he really wanted to be in Ridgewood for the 4th. Tara hopes the village can hold on to that small-town community look and feel with memorable events that bring people back home. She also appreciates New York State and spends time with friends at Oneida Lake, in the Finger Lakes region, and in Saratoga which offers everything from the arts to horse racing. "Stopping for a hike with Tippy at Fillmore Glen on the way upstate is my favorite," she adds.

In college, Tara had the opportunity to study abroad in Banbury, Oxfordshire, England, at Wroxton College. She sees travel as an essential experience to understanding the world from different perspectives. While in England, she came across a quote from Winston Churchill that perfectly encapsulates who she is and what she cares most about: "We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give." "I've had a very fortunate life filled with wonderful people and great experiences," Tara shares. "I'm just happy to be here."