Written by Carol Pomeday
Wednesday, 01 December 2010 17:05

Three generations of Fellenz women gather for Christmas tradition

Since she was a little girl, Jane Fellenz remembers going to grandfather's farm in Upper Michigan and gathering evergreens, pine cones, grapevines and berries with her mother and sisters. She then helped her mother hand-tie and decorate wreaths to give to friends, family and neighbors.

"That was her gift to many people," Fellenz said.

Fellenz carries on the tradition at her Town of Port Washington farm, where a former horse barn is turned into a wreath factory at this time of the year.

Beginning in mid-November, Fellenz, her husband Richard, their daughters Becky and Rachel Skell and granddaughters Lauren and Madison Skell cut boughs from the hundreds of white and Jack pine and blue and white spruce trees they planted.

They only cut as much as they can use that week.

"It's just like cooking — the fresher the ingredients, the better the product," Fellenz said. "I also use the cooking rule, 'What grows together goes together.'"

By Thanksgiving, Fellenz's daughter Sarah of Orlando, Fla., her niece Ann Aranda of Lima, Peru, and sister Evelyn Fellenz-Clark of Orlando, Wis.,
join in the family fun.

Matriarch Betty Hubbard participated until she died four years ago.

“Now, we try to make the first one for her and take it to the cemetery,” Fellenz said. “This year we put a glitzy green and bronze ribbon on it. As I drove away, I noticed the traditional red bows showed up more, but mother always liked having something different, the latest trend. I think she would approve.”

The wreaths and other holiday items were made as gifts until Becky bought Christmas in Port in 2000. She sold custom wreaths at the shop until it closed in 2005.

By then, the Fellenz women were decorating area businesses and houses for the holidays. They now sell wreaths and take orders at farmers’ markets and craft shows. They decorated the pots in downtown Port Washington and the exterior of Harris Bank offices in Port and Saukville.

“We finished all our orders, and now it’s fun stuff just for us,” Fellenz said Saturday as she helped Lauren pick boughs for a wreath for her teacher.
It’s more therapy than a business, said the women, who all have demanding full-time jobs.

“We get to be together and learn what everybody is doing,” Fellenz said.

“I don’t know that it would be as much if we did it full time. This way, we can do what we want and have fun with it.”

“It’s a sisterhood thing,” said Rachel, a special education teacher who lives in Hartford and also teaches at the University of Wisconsin-West Bend Campus and Lakeland College in Milwaukee.

Fellenz is a nurse supervisor who handles insurance appeals. Becky recently earned a nursing degree and works at Aurora Medical Center in Grafton. She also helps out when needed at a nursing home.

“When I closed the Christmas shop, I had to figure out what I wanted to be,” Becky said.

“My mother and sister are nurses, and I thought I would never be a nurse, but when I looked at what I liked about the shop — being in the community and helping people — I decided it might be a good fit.”

She sees many of her old customers at the hospital.

Unlike previous years when it’s been cold, this has been a pleasant year to cut boughs. The boughs are loaded onto a wagon that Rick pulls with a tractor, and they jump on for a ride to the barn.

The boughs are carefully chosen to help shape the tree. Branches are cut in the center of a fork.

“That way, the branch will continue to grow nicely,” Becky said. “We don’t want to destroy any trees. We want to keep them for wildlife.

“I used to be able to walk anywhere in here and know where I was, but the trees have grown so tall, I can get lost now if I’m not paying attention.”

She and her parents also have a large organic vegetable, herb and fruit garden. This year, they had 30 pepper plants, most of them hot and spicy, that they use for cooking and decorating.

They cut herbs and flowers at their peak and dry them in the barn to use in wreaths and arrangements.

Becky, who has a condominium in Port Washington, likes to decorate in the latest trend. This year, she has a contemporary silver theme. Her wreath is square with a silver bow and accents.

“The square wreaths were new this year. Everybody commented on them, but not many bought them,” she said.

The women were challenged this year to create eco-friendly wreaths that can be entirely composted. They use metal forms with wires that are clamped over clumps of boughs.

“We’re thinking of using grapevines and raffia next year, but we have to think it through more,” Fellenz said.

Another holiday tradition is cutting a Christmas tree from their property on Christmas Eve.

“We make and decorate Christmas cookies, then the children pick out the tree,” Fellenz said.

The tree is cut and hauled back by the men.

“We look for one that has to be removed to allow the trees around it to grow straight,” Becky said. “It’s never a perfect tree. It’s always a Charlie Brown tree.”

“We bring it in and it smells so fresh and wonderful,” Fellenz said. “Sometimes, we just put lights on it.

“Hopefully, my girls will carry on these traditions and grow their own trees.”

Lauren responded, “I want to live here forever.”

“So do I,” said Becky, who’s already picked out a spot for a house she wants to build on the property.

GATHERING BOUGHS last weekend were (front) Madison Skell, (second row) Lauren Skell, Becky Fellenz, (back row) Sarah Fellenz holding daughter Evelyn Fellenz-Clark, Ann Aranda, Jane Fellenz and Rachel Skell. Photo by Sam Arendt