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A warm thank you to 156 of her best friends

The decorations were up, the caterers notified, the invitations sent, the pianist hired, the glasses washed and silver polished. Now, it was time to take a breath, step back and relax before 156 guests showed up.

Three days before the Port Washington Christmas event that everyone wants an invitation to, hostess extraordinaire Shirli Flack was ready.

Shirli Flack was ready to greet guests and tables were laden with desserts and hearty hors deouvres.

"I could have the party tomorrow," she said. "But the caterers couldn't."

Flack's 37nd annual Christmas party was held Saturday at 409 N. Grand Ave. The house was aglow inside and out as soft piano music floated in the air. Food and drink flowed, along with animated conversations.

There were doctors and lawyers, plumbers and publishers, carpenters and business owners, landscapers and painters.

Near the end of the evening, everyone gathered in the piano room and sang Christmas carols for an hour from a song book prepared by Flack's daughter Rose Morgan.

The caroling is a treasured tradition.

"The first years when I said we would be caroling, people came in heavy clothes thinking we were going outside," Flack said.

Port Washington pianist Gary Haseley has been the piano player since 1964, when Flack and her husband Jack began holding the holiday parties at their Town of Belgium lake home. When the couple purchased the former William Niederkorn home in 1985, the winter party was moved there the following year.

"We always had to worry at the lake home if our guests would get home safely," Flack said.

Jack Flack died in 2007, but the holiday party tradition continued, in part in his memory.

"Jack liked the children to be exposed to entertaining. He liked to dress up and wanted them to dress up," Flack said.

"In the early years, we had the children take coats, then the grandchildren when they were 14 or 15. They could watch, but they couldn't participate until they turned 21.

"When they were in college, they would argue with us. I told them, 'You need to take everything in time. Don't rush your lives along. It goes fast enough.'"

Flack plans every detail of the party, enlisting her family — she has eight children, 19 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren — or others to help when needed.

This is her party. A little over the top perhaps, but one that people remember and talk about.

"The best party? I don't know about that, but I know the best people," Flack said. "It's a good party only because I have great friends and they get along together.

"People who help me during the year are invited. It's my thank you and Christmas card to them, and it's a gift to me when I get to be with them."

The Flacks used to hold two Christmas parties — one on a Saturday night for local people who could party later at night and another one the following Sunday for out-of-town guests.

"That got to be a bit much, so we went with one big party," Flack said.

She used to do most of the cooking, making the food in her lower-level work kitchen and sending it upstairs on a dumbwaiter to the main-floor kitchen, where there are warming ovens.

Now, she has the food catered. Shully's Catering of Thiensville prepared and served the food the past two years.

But she still makes gallons of her signature cosmopolitan and other martini cocktails.

On Saturday, Flack greeted every guest, talking to each for a little while. It took about an hour.

"We had 156 people. Four couldn't come because they got sick, but four showed up who didn't RSVP, so it worked out," Flack said.

"I didn't sit down at all. I didn't eat much, but the girls insisted I take something when they passed food around.

"It's like a wedding reception. You get to greet everyone, but don't get much chance to talk with them."

After checking their coats upstairs, guests could mill around on the main and lower levels, finding places to sit or stand in the dining, living, music, library and family rooms and two

kitchens.

The garage was turned into a bar room several years ago. That was the wine and beer bar on Saturday.

On the lower level, a storage room was converted into a bar area, where mixed cocktails are served.

When the couple bought the house, the lower level was a large laundry room, Flack said.

A former workshop was turned into a staging area for caterers.

Flack's daughter Vici Dohrwardt designed the invitations, but Flack mailed them, checking to make sure everyone was invited.

Flack, who lives in Florida during most of the winter, is known for her parties there also. She returns home for the holidays.

The exterior decorations are up before Thanksgiving, but Flack won't allow the lights to be turned on until the Sunday after Thanksgiving.

Flack designs the exterior display, adding pieces almost every year, then handyman Ryan Mueller puts up the decorations that include a Nativity scene, angels, nutcrackers, Christmas trees, reindeer, wreathing along the fences and a life-size stately Santa standing next to a real sleigh filled with gifts.

"My daughter found the Santa several years ago and called to see if I wanted him," Flack said. "Children will come up to him, shake his hand and talk to him. Lots of families take pictures with him."

Her Santa has velvet clothes, so when it rains, she puts him in the workshop.

"He can take snow better than rain," Flack said.

Two days after the party, Flack said she was still exhausted but busy getting ready for Christmas.

The party was worth the effort and a lot of fun, she said.

It's a lot easier to prepare for this party, Flack said, than summer parties at her lake home when twice as many people are invited. That party has a theme each year.

"So does this one, only it's the same every year — Christmas," she said.

"When you do something that people are really happy and excited about, it makes you feel good. And that's the reason you do it."