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My View: The solo life has its rewards, volunteering among them

Sharon Cramer Aug 28, 2022

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When Blanche DuBois explained in "A Streetcar Named Desire," "I have always depended upon the kindness of strangers," she was describing her vagabond life. Here in WNY, "kindness of strangers" has a completely different meaning.

We have the chance to benefit from the generosity of volunteers throughout our region. They give their time to offer tours, to inform and uplift. For example, when recently taking Explore Buffalo's exceptional Hertel Avenue History tour, I learned about the historical figures whose last names I took for granted – people like Michael Shea and John Stephen Hertel. I now realize that, more than just names, these are people whose amazing visions for our region persist.



Sharon Cramer, Ph.D., knows that the past has no veto over the present.

Forest Lawn's eloquent silence is brilliantly explained by docents, who share stories of the lives of its residents. They enable us to respect the many accomplishments of our citizens, whose life stories depict courage and imagination. The Blue Sky Mausoleum, a designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, is perfectly situated. It offers us pause, to consider eternity. When visiting the gardens that complement the Martin House and Graycliff, I so admire the volunteers who dig and plant. They bring alive the original concepts of the spring-to-fall plantings Wright designed for his western New York masterpieces.

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During our summers in WNY, gardens abound, with profusions of colors and textures. But it is the gifted gardeners who position plants in the right sun or shade, alongside whimsical objects to make us smile, or remember. Gardens Buffalo Niagara sponsors two very different annual garden experiences. Many know about the popular Garden Walk Buffalo, begun in 1995, occurring on the last weekend in July. "Open Gardens" (begun in 2011) is a best-kept secret: gardeners of 100 extraordinary gardens welcome us into their spaces. Taking place on Thursdays and Fridays in July, it offers chances for intimate conversations with gardeners eager to share stories of their plants, projects, pains and successes. The talents of the gardeners are only exceeded by their big-heartedness, in cheerfully opening their gardens to strangers.

As a single person, I take advantage of all these opportunities. Tours are easy to join as a solo, even if everyone else on the tour is paired up. When I visit gardens, there's no penalty for being alone. When I arrive, nobody says, "Just one?" And as a volunteer docent, helper and resource person with several organizations, I dust off my work life skills and put them to use. Freedom to be choosy is perfect for me now, when I am on my own.

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Solo. Alone, but not lonely. Examination of the solo life has taken on new meaning for me since December, when (via Zoom) I joined a team of thoughtful, patient researchers in eastern Michigan. The project ("Solo Acts," funded in part by the Ralph C. Wilson Foundation) started with interviews of 18 solos over age 65, to learn about solos' needs, challenges and dreams. The team took interview content and transformed it into 10 short theatrical vignettes, which are funny, thought-provoking and true.

On Sept. 23, two performances of "Solo Acts" will be offered (free, advance registration required) at the Benderson JCC in Getzville.

The project took on this challenge: to change perceptions of "solos." Instead of viewing solos with pity, as needy, picture them as complicated, interesting. Did we succeed? Come and see.

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