

Realtor Karen Eagle believes in the Cleveland Kids’ Book Bank

By MAREN JAMES

Realtor Karen Eagle and her team transitioned to Elite Sotheby’s International Realty in 2021. Last December, Currents caught up with her as she talked about her plans and goals during this demanding real estate market. But beyond real estate, Eagle wanted to focus on another part of her life, and that’s her volunteerism.

“No matter if times are good or bad, I’ve always partnered with an organization. It allows me to do something meaningful,” Eagle says. Her current project is the Cleveland Kids’ Book Bank. “They started out six years ago as volunteers who realized there are many kids in underserved areas who do not have access to books,” she says. “That really resonated with me. I’m always looking for a cause that helps children. I’m a huge reader, a life-long reader. I grew up in Warren, Ohio, a smaller town that had a bookmobile. I remember my mom taking us there and I would come home with armfuls of books. I recall the librarians were so helpful, especially after I had blown through everything in my age range, and they recommended more. It was an incredible gift to have access to those books,” she adds.

Recently through social media, Eagle invited donations to the Book Bank by dropping them off at her office. She was delighted with the response. “I’m grateful for the support, and for the support of the Schmidt Family [owners of Sotheby’s in Cleveland]. “The Schmidt Community Fund is an initiative that invests in local communities, especially in youth programs, and they have been generous supporters of the Book Bank as well,” she says.

Colleen Watt is the Cleveland Kids’ Book Bank operations director. She estimates the organization has 100,000 books in its facility in Midtown at any given time. “We buy books from publishers, and get donations from individuals and book drives,” she says. She describes how the Book Bank obtains most of its inventory through large online wholesalers who bundle hundreds of books together and sell them at low cost. The books are for kids ages one through 18.

“Covid affected our numbers, but we are on track to



distribute 400,000 books this year,” Watt states. “We gave out 68,000 books last month. That’s the most since 2019.” Watt says the Book Bank reaches 100,000 kids per year, if not more, throughout Greater Cleveland. (Most kids get more than one book.) “When we first started, there was a national statistic that indicated two out of three low-income families didn’t own a single kids book. We’re here to help change that.”

And that’s the key – ownership. While Cleveland and Cuyahoga libraries abound, for some, the process of borrowing and returning is complicated. But more importantly, book ownership means kids are building their first home library. “Kids get to choose their first book, and they’re excited to do it,” Watt says. “They’re so happy to have a book of their own, so the quality is super important.” All incoming books are sorted and examined. Any item deemed too used gets recycled.

Watt explains that books are not given to kids or families directly. Instead the Book Bank has hundreds of partners both on the collecting side and the distribution side. She estimates they distribute through 1,500 organizations such as community centers, churches, schools, after-school programs, day cares, food banks, and even libraries.

Volunteers assist in many ways –organizing a collection drive at their business or school. Others transport or sort incoming books. And of course, cash is always accepted, because just like a food bank, the Book Bank has more buying power than an individual has. Current needs include books featuring diverse characters, especially children of color.

“I still get excited when I see a bookmobile,” Karen Eagle says. “My kids think I’m nuts, but there’s nothing like that new-book feel, and every child has the potential to become an avid reader.”

One of the many volunteers who assist in many capacities at the Cleveland Kids’ Book Bank. Photograph courtesy of the Cleveland Kids’ Book Bank



“Lost Restaurants of Downtown Cleveland” author Bette Lou Higgins. Photographs courtesy of Lindsay Yost Bott

Local author relates the delicious history of Cleveland restaurants

By CYNTHIA SCHUSTER EAKIN

The history of Cleveland’s restaurants is an appetizing read.

“Northeast Ohio’s restaurants have always been cooking up some good stuff,” according to Bette Lou Higgins, author of “Lost Restaurants of Downtown Cleveland.”

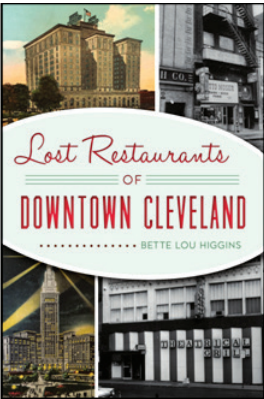
Higgins, who has been promoting her Arcadia Press book through the branches of the Cuyahoga County Public Library, covers more than 200 years of Cleveland restaurants in a visual presentation that lasts about 30 minutes.

A practiced storyteller, Higgins is the artistic director of Eden Valley Enterprises. Through their living history presentations, Eden Valley staff members combine history and theatrics to bring history to life. Eden Valley has produced special educational programs for many local organizations, including The Health Museum of Cleveland, the Lorain County Metro Parks, North Coast Harbor, The Steamship William G. Mather, Roscoe Village, The Great Lakes Historical Society and the Western Reserve Historical Society. Higgins begins her presentation by displaying a tea pot, claiming that it is the symbol of storytellers because, “They always spout off.”

As an author of other historical literature, Higgins said she became interested in the history of Cleveland restaurants when Arcadia approached her. “They called me. Arcadia Press has what they call a Palate Series, featuring restaurants across the country. They have a whole series on lost restaurants and were looking for a Cleveland author,” she said.

According to her presentation, the history of Cleveland restaurants goes back to 1791, when Lorenzo Carter built the first public house. She talks about the food, the experiences and the characters that have been associated with the Northeast Ohio restaurant scene.

“From humble and hungry beginnings, the city of Cleveland grew over centuries until it boasted a dizzying array of gustatory choices. City dwellers and travelers alike flocked to the eateries at Public Square and the Terminal Tower, including the Fred Harvey restaurants with their famous Harvey Girls,” Higgins’ book notes. “A single block-long street, Short Vincent featured the Theatrical Grille, the longest-running jazz joint in the area. The walls of Otto Moser’s were a veritable Hollywood



roll call, and the New York Spaghetti House offered a complete dining and aesthetic experience.”

The Theatrical Grille was owned by Morris “Mushy” Wexler and featured top-name entertainment including Judy Garland, Dean Martin, Gene Krupa and Dizzy Gillespie, Higgins said. It became the headquarters of notorious hoodlum Alex “Shondor” Burns, until he died in a car bombing.

Chef Hector’s restaurant in downtown Cleveland was owned by Ettore “Hector” Boiardi. People loved Chef Hector’s spaghetti sauce and began asking for the recipe. “When they made the recipe at home and it didn’t taste the same, he told them that they used the wrong pasta,” Higgins said. Boiardi began selling sauce in milk bottles and then created a new foodservice, selling carryout dinners. Eventually, he boxed up some canned sauce, uncooked pasta and grated cheese and packaged it under the name Chef Boyardee. His food was so popular that he catered President Woodrow Wilson’s wedding reception at the Greenbrier Hotel.

When Cleveland’s Hotel Winton opened, it housed the famous Rainbow Room complete with an ice rink and ice shows. By that time, its chef, Hector Boiardi, was becoming quite famous, Higgins noted.

The New York Spaghetti House was opened by Mario and Maria Brigotti in 1927, she said. It was famous for its brown sauce and for its waiters who could remember 10 orders without writing them down.

Higbees opened in 1931 with a tea room on the tenth floor. The company opened the Silver Grille in 1935. It was art deco in design with walls painted varying shades of green accented with silver. Higgins said there was a fountain in the center of the restaurant with a goldfish pond. Children were served their meals in miniature toy stoves.

The Casino Restaurant on Superior Ave. had three floors and was known for its elaborate hanging oak staircase. It featured an oyster bar and proprietor Leonard Schlather served Schlather beer.

Pirchner’s Alpine Village, was owned by Herman Pirchner, who could balance 55 full beer mugs as he slid across the floor of his restaurant.

According to Higgins, when the Ohio Theatre closed, it reopened as the Mayfair Casino. Photos of the casino are included in her book.

To learn more about the fascinating history of Northeast Ohio restaurants, you can attend one of Bette Lou Higgins’ presentations at the Cuyahoga County Public Library branches, or read her entertaining book, “Lost Restaurants of Downtown Cleveland.” Higgins’ upcoming library presentations are scheduled at: Gates Mills on July 6 at 2 p.m.; Berea on July 12 at 7 p.m.; Independence on July 25 at 2 p.m.; Fairview Park on Aug. 3 at 7 p.m.; and North Royalton on Aug. 11 at 7 p.m.

The Nature Center at Shaker Lakes “Nature at Night”

This year’s Nature at Night, the annual benefit for the Nature Center at Shaker Lakes sold out 525 tickets faster than any previous year. Tickets are at a premium for several reasons – a great party outdoors, signature cocktails, inspired dishes from small plates to dinner from talented local chefs, a Cleveland-centric silent auction, and of course the setting – 20 acres with eight distinct habitats, gardens, trails and more.

Outdoor events can be tricky with Northeast Ohio weather. Organizers mentioned that the event has been held in melting heat, rainstorms, and worse, but this year’s conditions were ideal. What Nature at Night lacks in consistent weather is made up abundantly with consistent support. For close to two decades the event has been a lovely way to gather with friends old and new under the stars within the tranquil oasis that is the Nature Center. “This just gets better and better every year. It’s Shaker’s neighborhood block party,” says patron and past organizer Kate Stenson. “It’s so gratifying to see the young people making sure this great resource remains successful.”

Patrons enjoyed a gracious welcome at check-in with passed cocktails. Small bites were available from Doug Katz’s Zhug, Bridget Thibeault’s Luna, Spice, Zoma, On the Rise, and more local food partners, with cocktails invented by Gigi’s, beers from Sibling Revelry, and wines from The Wine Spot. It takes a village to feed and refresh over five hundred!

President and CEO Kay Carlson offered brief remarks and thanks to the thirty-plus sponsors. Carlson has announced her retirement from The Nature Center



Doug Katz and Bridget Thibeault

after fifteen years of leadership.

After additional remarks from board president Karen Kidwell, guests were welcome to roam the grounds, find their tables, bid on silent auction items, and enjoy the sound of the live band, Light Up the Moon.

Organizers of Nature at Night hoped to raise \$100,000 for general operating expenses such as maintenance of the natural habitats throughout the center and ensuring that admission remains free for their 140,000 visitors each year. That number includes 13,000 students from the east side, the City of Cleveland, and beyond who take advantage of the trails, treehouse, and outdoor classroom. The Nature Center is a non-profit organization that receives no municipal, state, or federal tax dollars. STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY RITA KUEBER



Matthew Carrier, Kay Carlson, Jeff Kadlic and Karen Kidwell



Byron DaSilva, Jeff Potter, Mary DaSilva, Meredyth Ralph and Ingrid Tolentino



Nancy Seitz, Jim Arnold, Gail Arnold, Kate Stenson, and Brit Stenson



Event co-chairs Laura Dean, Courtney Novak, Libby Ray and Catey Peters



Pat and Julie Pastore with Rob Sikora



Marge Moore with Kelly and Tom Morley