

25 honored as 'living treasures' who've given Edgewater its edge



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You've probably never heard of Betty Barclay.

Her only claim to fame is that a long time ago she helped out with the Girl Scouts and the Cub Scouts and the PTA, and when she realized her Edgewater neighborhood didn't have a library, she fought for one and got it.

You've probably never heard of Maryon Gray.

Her only claim to fame is that when she saw the ugly weeds under the railroad tracks at Ravenswood Avenue in Edgewater, she agitated to turn the space into a community garden, and the garden she created inspired other gardens.

Almaz Yigizaw?

Since she arrived in Edgewater from Ethiopia, as a refugee who spoke no English, her celebrity hasn't ranged much farther than her two restaurants, which serve good food and provide a gathering spot for other African immigrants to learn how to negotiate the foreign land of Chicago.

I'd never heard of any of these people until I went to the Edgewater Historical Museum on Friday to see its "Living Treasures of Edgewater" exhibit.

I don't usually write about exhibits. But Marty Stewart is a persistent and persuasive guy, and more than once he let me know that this was a story worth telling.

He was right.

The Edgewater museum is in a refurbished firehouse just across Ashland Avenue from the First Slice Pie Cafe. The cafe, at least on Yelp!, is far more famous than most of the neighborhood's living treasures.

"These are mostly people who said, 'I don't know why you picked me,'" said Dorothy Nygren, Stewart's wife, as they showed off the exhibit.

"Unsung heroes," Stewart said.

And that's the point.

Anyone who enjoys the Edgewater lakefront; who loves the cafes, restaurants and boutiques of Andersonville; who appreciates that there's a Chicago neighborhood where the young, the old, the gay, the straight, the native-born and the foreign-bred get along fairly peaceably, owes something to the people on the museum walls.



ANTHONY SOUFFLE/TRIBUNE PHOTO

Marty Stewart is on the Edgewater Historical Society board and helped organize the exhibit "Living Treasures of Edgewater" at the Edgewater Historical Museum.

Stewart, a retired marketer, modeled the idea on a Japanese custom of naming the country's "living treasures."

Gather their stories. Praise their work. Do it now before they're gone.

To find the treasures, the historical society solicited names from churches, block clubs and condo associations, then picked 25. There are more than 25 Edgewater residents worthy of the title, but that's the number that matched the society's 25th year in operation.

Many of the choices turned out to be immigrants.

"There's Elizabeth Szegho, from France," Stewart said, pointing at photos around the museum. "There's Tracy Poyser, from Germany. Sheli Lulkin, Israel. Roula Alakiotou, she's from Greece."

Each of them has a story. Alakiotou's involves Sheridan Road.

Alakiotou came to Chicago to study architecture, and as a young mother lived along Sheridan, which parallels the lakefront. She was bothered by what she called the street's "can-yonization," and by how hard it was for her kids to cross the road to play safely at the lake.

Today if you drive up Sheridan Road, you might be surprised to see two old mansions and beautiful Berger Park. Without Alakiotou's nine-year fight for that patch of history and tranquillity, Sheridan might be a relentless strip of modern high-rise congestion.

A few of the people who made the "treasures" list have had their share of publicity. Three are politicians, which

stirred some argument in the selection process.

"But some politicians go above and beyond to help," Nygren said.

So the politicians are there along with the man who promoted block clubs and the woman who works to fill empty storefronts.

As Stewart and Nygren talked, the phone rang.

The caller was the oldest of their living treasures, Rabbi Herman Schaalman. He has been working in Edgewater since 1955. His efforts to bring people of different faiths together seeded the ground for all the community work that followed.

He was coming to a ceremony for the living treasures Saturday and wanted to know: Would there be a place to park?

As I walked through the exhibit — photos, text and short video interviews — I thought about everything we take for granted in neighborhoods that work. That nice cafe. A pretty public garden. The friendliness on the street.

"Living Treasures of Edgewater" is a reminder that neighborhoods are the work of ordinary individuals, each picking up a piece of the job and carrying it.

I found myself wishing that every neighborhood in Chicago would do an exhibit of its living treasures.

In the meantime, there's this one.

The museum (edgewaterhistory.org/ehs/) is open Saturday and Sunday afternoons. It's free. Great pie across the street.

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