



It's Your House, Now

Sherriann Mancini

Highland Park residents have a new “old” home away from home, and it's right in our backyard! The Highland Park Community House at Elm Place and North Sheridan Road, originally built as a home for the Highland Park Woman's Club, has been reincarnated as the new place to make things happen, watch things happen or be a part of what's happening. The Community House truly lives up to its name—a warm and welcoming home for the people of Highland Park.

Donated to the community in 1994 by the Highland Park Woman's Club, the Community House is a rare gift, one that embodies the true spirit of this wonderful city. Because it is a non-profit organization that receives no financial income from the city, a governing board of 11 dedicated volunteers ensures that the Community House supports and enhances Highland Park's intellectual and cultural life. As Board Chairman Dan Kornblut explains, “The Community House is dedicated to being the venue for our connection to each other and our community.” Indeed, the self-sustaining Community House offers an extensive array of public programs and private events while preserving a building of historic significance.

The Highland Park Community House began its life in 1924 as the Highland Park Woman's Club. Designed by prominent architect Arthur Brown as a clubhouse for the organization, the magnificent red brick Colonial Revival home was an architectural and philanthropic accomplishment. The historically significant building even served as a blood bank by the American Red Cross during World War II.

The Woman's Club had been founded in 1899 with the ideal of reform, education, the arts and, most especially, philanthropy. Foremost among its many achievements, the Woman's Club established the first public library in Highland Park by securing a \$12,000 grant from the Carnegie Foundation. Its members were also responsible for initiating reform in the public schools. As former Woman's Club President Lois Dever, recalled “The first Parent Teacher Association (for Elm Place School) had its birth at a club meeting.”

Finances became a crisis for the club in 1988 when, for the first time ever, it was served with a real estate tax assessment for prior years. This was the result of one individual's lawsuit insisting that organizations such as the Woman's Club of Highland Park, Ravinia Festival and the American Legion be taxed as private properties rather than not-for-profit institutions. The Woman's Club simply could not afford the continued expense of clubhouse operations compounded by

yearly taxes. A decision was made to consider selling the property and treasured clubhouse to a real estate developer since it was zoned for residential use.

If not for the passionate determination of one man, this community jewel would forever have been lost. That man is Marvin Marder; the resurrection and subsequent transformation of this historic landmark is a fascinating lesson in perseverance and dedication.

Marder is a long-time resident of Highland Park and no stranger to public service. Having founded his own law firm in Highland Park, Marder served as a City Councilman and was a member of the City Plan Commission, Civil Service Commission and Zoning Board of Appeals. “When I learned that the clubhouse might be for sale, I remembered how much I admired the building, and I knew we could never replace its wonderful ballroom and auditorium.”



Marder set up a meeting with some board members to propose they gift the building to the community for use as a cultural center. He invited the directors from Gorton Community Center in Lake Forest and the Winnetka Community Center to discuss how residents of Highland Park would benefit. The officers of the Woman's Club embraced the idea, going so far as to meet with then-Mayor Dan Pierce.

However, this initiative was stopped cold when a new Woman's Club Board of Directors voted instead to sell to a developer who would demolish the house and build 16 condominiums. Marder placed a poster ad in the Highland Park News pleading, in bold letters, “HELP SAVE THE BEAUTIFUL AND HISTORIC HIGHLAND PARK WOMAN'S CLUB FROM THE WRECKER'S BALL.” After two long months of silence, Marder finally received a single response. A former Woman's Club board member offered to help.

Numerous meetings, negotiations, even lawsuits ensued. Fortunately, the dream of saving that “little” clubhouse became a reality: The City Council appointed a task force of prominent civic leaders—led by Marder, former councilman Calvin Tobin and Ruth Buhai, as well as Lois Dever—to assess the feasibility of establishing a civic and cultural center at this locale.

(continued on page 30)

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(continued from page 28)

The task force interviewed Highland Park's citizens, local businesses and community organizations. In 1992 the in-depth study determined that the Woman's Club building was ideal for a community center. Calling on the City's last Master Plan, the task force stated, "A Community Center is a needed gathering place not now available [and] would...provide the foundation for a richer and exciting civic and cultural life in Highland Park."

In 1994 a five-year quest was finally fulfilled: The Woman's Club donated its clubhouse and property to the people of Highland Park for the sole purpose of establishing a community center. As Ms. Dever explained at the time, "The current members of the Highland Park Woman's Club voted with their generous hearts... and now the charming and historic building at the corner of Sheridan Road and Elm Place has officially become the Highland Park Community Center."

It has been a long evolution from clubhouse to community house, but care has been taken to preserve its distinctive charm while improving the facility. Many historic features including the ballroom's soaring vaulted ceiling with antique lighting fixtures have been lovingly restored. Now, visitors can appreciate the unique character of the Community House while enjoying modern amenities, a remarkable testament to a community of residents who cherish their past while welcoming the future.

Drive north of downtown along Sheridan Road. Instead of a block of four-story condos, you will see two historically significant buildings—the former Woman's Club and the American Legion Hall (now The Art Center)—given new life and breathing new life back into our community as a unique, thriving Cultural Arts Campus. Stop by the Community House, and pick up a brochure detailing myriad programs and private celebration opportunities. Sit a while in the newly plush living room, gazing through the soaring arched windows to enjoy the natural beauty of the Jesse Lowe Smith Heritage Garden, where native Illinois plants and flowers set a beautiful tableau for this new, old Highland Park treasure.

Unique spaces are available for rental at the renovated historical landmark Highland Park Community House. The facility features a spacious ballroom, large living room with a bay window, state-of-the-art commercial kitchen, new rest rooms and three outdoor garden areas. The Community House is fully air-conditioned and has an accessible entrance and washroom.

The ballroom seats up to 200 guests for dinner; with a dance floor, it comfortably accommodates 150 guests. The ballroom features a vaulted ceiling, vintage light fixtures, hardwood floor and a performance stage.

Up to 100 guests can be accommodated in the living room and foyer for a standing reception. The gracious foyer has a fireplace and heirloom desk. The living room has a large bay window which looks over the stately front lawn. For outdoor ceremonies and receptions, the Heritage Garden and west lawn are also available.

Rental fees include use of tables and chairs, set-up and an on-site manager. A list of caterers who are familiar with the Community House is available. **Kim Loprest will welcome a call for an appointment to discuss your special event: 847-432-1515.**