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## Brook Street resident revitalizes neighborhood gathering after a pandemic hiatus

By Sharon K. Sobotta



Photo Sharon K. Sobotta

Those who live on Brook Street, play at the Brook Street Park or travel up and down Brook Street on the way to school or while partaking in a downtown stroll, have likely crossed paths with 80-year-old Margaret Szabo. And those who've chatted with her, showed kindness to her grandchild at the park or just answered their door when she showed up to introduce herself, have likely been on the receiving end of an invitation to Margaret and Jon Szabo's annual neighborhood party.

After a three-year pandemic hiatus, three dozen Lafayette residents from all ages and stages of life gathered in the Szabo's backyard on a sunny afternoon. A handful of kids swam in the glistening swimming pool while adults sat around picnic tables connecting with each other over conversation, bubbly and a potluck buffet that was served inside Margaret Szabo's childhood home.

"It's fun to know people and have people to say hi to as you walk through the community," Margaret Szabo says as she sits beside neighbor Scott Tenenbaum, whose lived on Brook Street for 40 years and Cheng Chi and his family who moved to the area from Shanghai, China just before the pandemic.

Szabo and her husband launched the annual neighborhood gathering tradition in 2005. And it's become a staple celebration that those who've crossed Szabo's path, lived near her or once did, look forward to every year. The annual tradition was put on pause between 2020-23 as the world dealt with COVID, but in spite of the three year gap, folks came back together as if they hadn't missed a beat.

"It's nice to once again be able to meet with friends and neighbors and acquaintances and people I've never met before," Scott Tenenbaum said. "It's important to be able to keep in touch with neighbors and be able to put yourself out in front of the community and connect with each other."

Tenenbaum doesn't take the gathering of people who share the common thread of living or spending time in the surrounding area but have a vast array of life experiences for granted.

"Margaret really puts herself out there. She goes out and meets neighbors and knocks on their doors or gets their numbers and calls them to personally invite them," Tenenbaum said. "That helps people feel included, like they belong."

Cheng Chi and his wife and daughter moved to Lafayette from Shanghai just ahead of the pandemic and attended Szabo's first party (which was the last one she hosted until this year) in 2019.

"When we came here from Shanghai, we were very happy to know the people here and be a part of this quiet and peaceful community," Chi said. "It feels nice to be included and to be warmly welcomed in this community."

Chi's daughter is a rising fifth grader at Lafayette Elementary School and strikes up a conversation with a rising sixth grader named Shreyansh, who she recognizes from school last year, as Chi shares his experience.

"That's what it's all about," an elder at the table chimes in. "Connections."

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