

CINDY PHILLIPPE

Making a Life by What She Gives

BY JENNA CAPUTO
PHOTOS BY ANGELA MIA PHOTOGRAPHY

"Do all the good that you can, in all the places you can, in all the ways that you can, at all the times you can, for all the people you can, for as long as you can."

-John Wesley

Cindy Phillippe takes this John Wesley quote very seriously. Volunteer work has been her life's passion, and she has made a huge impact on our community because of it.

Born in Philadelphia, Cindy moved seven times before ending up in Niskayuna at age 12 due to her father's job. They had come from Williamsport, PA, home of the Little League. "I remember going to games for the Little League World Series," she says. "That was exciting for our small town!"

Her introduction to Niskayuna was exciting too. A major snowstorm hit on her very first day at Van Antwerp school and she missed the bus home because she didn't know which one she was supposed to take. "So I started walking home on a route I had only been on when my mother had driven me to school that morning. Somehow, I managed to find my way without boots or gloves as the snow filled up the streets. My mother was a nervous wreck when I arrived almost 90 minutes after the bus was supposed to drop me off."

Luckily, her first day of school had been wonderful and the teachers and students had made her feel welcome. She threw herself into the after-school clubs, and after graduation in 1966, she went on to Skidmore College, majoring in Economics and Business. At the time, Skidmore was still an all-girls school, so many events were held with the all-male Union College. She met her future husband, Dick Phillippe, on the tennis court at Schenectady Central Park when a mutual friend introduced them. "Dick practically ignored me so of course I refused to be interested in him. Things changed when we met up in Saratoga that fall," she remembers. They were married for almost 51 years with much love and laughter in their home until Dick passed away in January 2020 after a long battle with Alzheimer's.

Initially, Cindy and Dick both worked on Wall Street. Dick became a financial advisor and eventually a Senior Vice President for RBC Wealth Management. Cindy worked for an international bank, researching foreign banks to determine if her company would extend credit to them. However, once their children came along, Cindy's life focused on raising the children and creating a volunteer career so she could contribute to the community. "It was a great way to keep my mind challenged beyond childcare and I hoped to



be able to help others," she reminisces. "I was also inspired by my mother, whose involvement in her community I had watched as a child. In fact, she chaired the very first house tour in the Capital Region to raise money for her church to support missions. She is now 94 and she's probably in better shape than I am!"

Cindy's urge to make a difference began in high school when she became president of a club that encouraged healthy activities through Niskayouth, a monthly evening held at the school that offered options for basketball, dancing, a movie, and soda and snacks for grades 9-12. "Today's students would probably not be interested in spending a Saturday night like that, but students back then loved it!" she says.

For many years she was active in the Junior League of Schenectady, which promotes volunteerism and supports numerous programs to benefit the community. The experience offered her the chance to learn about the needs of the Capital Region and allowed her to expand the number of places where she volunteered. One of those early organizations was the YWCA domestic violence shelter.

"I was interested in that because my mother had been abused and showed me how women in that situation could turn their lives around with support and guidance. After my father left, my mother picked herself up and applied for a job with Dr. Grace Jorgensen, who owned Bellevue Maternity Hospital, and who gave my mom a lot of encouragement. I am so proud of Mom for how she built a

career and supported her children, and I wanted to be involved with the shelter so I could help others start their lives over."

Cindy also worked early on for an agency that helped identify sexually abused elementary students by using a puppet show to talk about good touch, bad touch. "I would observe the children to see if any of them had a bad reaction. When you witnessed a child quietly crying during the presentation, you knew there was a problem. That was heartbreaking!" says Cindy. "But then the agency was able to connect the child with the appropriate professional."

Cindy has always enjoyed her association with the Niskayuna Community Action Program, including her involvement with the first several Niska Days. Working within the schools was important to her and she was instrumental in the after parties for the Junior Prom and Senior Ball, which provided a safe and fun place for the students to go later in the evening. Eventually, students lost interest and went on to find their own, not-so-healthy activities, but in the 1995-96 school year, a group of determined moms decided to bring the parties back with a little creativity. Working with area PTOs, they collaborated with Niskayuna students, drew up a plan, and fundraised with local businesses. They held the party at a location away from school with many activities like a live band, raffles, sumo wrestling, Velcro wall, and much more. The event was a huge success and still continues due to ongoing parental support.

Over the years, Cindy has worked with almost 30 different



organizations, but some of her most rewarding work has been with the Niskayuna Community Foundation (NCF) and the Boys and Girls Clubs of Schenectady (BGCS).

NCF's goal is to strengthen the community and keep it healthy for both the current and future generations. Cindy was a founding member of this vital organization and remains on the board 21 years later. "That's how much I believe in NCF's important work," she says. "Our mission is to inspire generosity, encourage equity, and invest in local solutions. We serve the Niskayuna community through grantmaking, awarding of scholarships, and supporting collaborations." Their work makes a large impact within the community. Since 2000, NCF has awarded more than \$400,000 in grants to more than 100 different organizations that directly impact the Niskayuna community.

BGCS serves about 12,000 young people annually, especially in the inner city. Their mission is to inspire and enable all young people to reach their full potential as caring, responsible, and productive citizens. They promote the social, educational, health, leadership, and character development of these youth during critical periods of their development. "The club has been a LIFELINE for children who need support," says Cindy. "It has been powerful to hear from youth who attended the club right through high school. Some have gone on to college and others have attained jobs. It is especially touching when past club members come back to work at BGCS."

In order to reach hundreds of kids during non-school hours, BGCS has programs at five clubhouses and six programs inside schools. They also operate two camps in the summer, and the City of Schenectady asked them to also run all the programs at the five city parks, including all four swimming pools.

Her volunteer work has provided Cindy with a variety of experiences to keep her life interesting, but that's not why she has such a passion for giving back to the community. "Hands-on volunteer work is extremely meaningful," she explains. "Receiving a hug from a victim of domestic violence, helping to access support for an abused child, accepting thanks from a family who just received their food basket, working with senior citizens, raising funds for organizations such as Hospice, teaching



a Brownie troop the basics of camping... are all examples of experiences that have enriched my life. There are so many valuable organizations that help improve the lives of so many needy people. Volunteers can make a huge difference in the ability of those not-for-profits to positively impact those people. The organizations I worked with taught me how important it was to support those who needed help, what programs would work, and how much could be accomplished by community members joining together.

Cindy has received several awards for her work. She was placed in the Niskayuna High School Hall of Fame. In 2021, she received the Trailblazer's Award from the



Women's Fund of the Capital Region. She also received the Volunteer of the Year Award from both the Junior League of Schenectady and the United Way. She was a member of the first Leadership Schenectady Program of the Schenectady County Chamber of Commerce, and this past winter, she was recognized as one of Channel 10's Remarkable Women.

Cindy and Dick had three children—Jennifer, who is a financial advisor, John Richard, Jr., who is an attorney for BP Oil in Washington, DC, and Jeffrey, who is an Expedition Leader, coordinating and leading tours in remote areas around the world. All three of her children each have two children of their own.

When she's not working within the community, Cindy loves spending time with her family and friends, going to Proctors (her favorite show so far is *Hamilton*), and reading with her two book clubs. She is an avid reader and has many favorite books. Her oldest favorite is *Gone with the Wind*. She looks forward to traveling again, especially to their yearly family trips to Stone Harbor, NJ, once the pandemic lightens.

In addition to her hands-on volunteer work, Cindy also is active with local philanthropy, assisting in fundraising efforts whenever she can. "I am SO grateful to the many Niskayuna residents who reach in their pockets to support organizations who help care for those in need. It's not the size of the gift that matters, it is that you care enough to do something to help others. If you can't volunteer, but you are able to contribute to a cause, your gift is of the utmost importance."

Cindy states that even volunteering alone has a huge economic impact on not-for-profits. According to a 2018 Volunteering in America report, over 77 million people in the US had volunteered, which was worth an estimated \$167 billion in economic value based on the independent sectors. As an anonymous person once stated, "Volunteering is an exercise in democracy. You vote in elections once a year, but when you volunteer, you vote every day about the kind of community you want to live in."

"I would encourage everyone who can to volunteer," says Cindy. "As Martin Luther King said, 'Life's most persistent and urgent question is, what are you doing for others?' No matter how big or how small the volunteer opportunity—everyone can make a positive impact on their community. I once read there are three kinds of people. Those who make things happen, those who watch things happen, and those who say, 'What happened?'. I hope those who are able to make things happen will do so."

For more information on how you can support the NCF, visit www.niskayunacf.org.

For more information about BGCS, visit www.bgcschenectady.org.