

# CLIFTON PARK

AUGUST 2023

## *Neighbors*



**BVM** Best Version Media®

PHOTO BY BROOKLYNNE BEEBE PHOTOGRAPHY

*Susan Leonard*  
Bringing People Together





## Susan Leonard

### Bringing People Together

By Jenna Caputo | Photos by Brooklynne Beebe Photography & Contributed by Susan Leonard

Susan Leonard always liked bringing people together. Born in Plattsburgh, Susan has lived in the Capital District most of her life. She enjoyed being with her friends and family, dancing, camping, and planning parties and activities for every holiday, even at a young age.

She received her college degree in business but never looked at it as job training. “College prepares us for our next step,” she says. “It shows the world that we can start and finish something and do it successfully. My *experiences* have prepared me for my position.”

At 18 years old, Susan met her future husband, Dan. She and her roommate needed to set up the telephone service for their new apartment, and as a telecommunications professional, Dan took care of them at the NYTel Phone Center store. They’ve been together ever since. In the 35 years they’ve been married, they had two children: Megan (30), a customer service/insurance professional in PA, and Kevin (27), an engineer in MA. When the kids were young, Susan always volunteered for their various activities. “I volunteered in my children’s school running and creating additional after-school programs each winter, planned family activities and other events, brought my neighborhood together with activities and new service opportunities, and volunteered in Girl Scouts and Cub Scouts. I was instrumental

in creating innovative programs for both adults and children, empowering them and having fun!”

In addition to having been a Girl Scout leader, troop organizer, an adult trainer, and events planner, Susan has been a volunteer with the Heritage Green Neighborhood and other organizations. Susan initially took a job running the senior program at an area center part time while the kids were young. As they got older, Susan returned to a full-time job in telecommunications, but missed working with seniors. When the Executive Director position at the Clifton Park Senior Community Center opened, she decided to go for it, knowing that all her past work and volunteer experience prepared her fully for the role. She was hired full time and never looked back. “I love planning programs, activities, special events, and trips. The connections and the friendships that have formed here at the Senior Center bring people together with common goals or interests. We’ve implemented new programs, activities, and trips based on the desires of our seniors. We’ve introduced service projects to the center that include soldiers, food pantries, animal shelters, and more. I believe if we’re not having fun, we’re not doing it right.”

While many think of a senior center as a place for old people, it’s not. It is so much more than that. “It’s a community of like-





mindful people,” Susan says. “You can find people with your same interest at the senior center. Whether it’s people who want to travel, dance, exercise, play games, or just have fun! But you do need to be at least 50 years old to join.”

The Clifton Park Center has a document with over two pages of activities available for members. Offering dance classes, exercise classes, music, crafts, games, discussion groups, service projects, dinners, day trips, overnight trips, and so much more, the center has a little bit of everything for every kind of taste. They also have regular jam sessions for all the music lovers, and they do service projects every year. One of their annual projects is for our soldiers overseas. It is a multi-week project where they cut, sew, decorate, and fill stockings for the troops. They also host a Breakfast with Santa at the holidays, enjoying a breakfast together and collecting breakfast items for the food pantry. In addition, they make Birthday Bags for the food pantry, filled with cake mix, frosting, candles, themed paper products, and toys. They also collect food and make animal beds and toys for the animal shelter, in addition to making sanitary pads for the girls in Zimbabwe, and many other ventures.

Susan loves that it’s a great place to meet up with friends or to make new friends in a fun atmosphere. “The Center has become a second family for many of us, including me,” she says. “Friends



are family you choose for yourself!” And it’s not just the members that are family. The town board is very supportive of everything they do, and the truly caring staff and volunteers make it all happen. “I don’t even have to ask; they are there for me and each other,” Susan explains. “When one person falls, there are many to pick them up, make meals, offer transportation. We could not do the many things that we do without our amazing and dedicated volunteers. They really are a family.”

Susan lives by the mantra of, “Do what you love, and you never work a day in your life.” When she’s not at the Center, Susan still works with the Girl Scouts as a trainer. She especially loves to teach both the girls and the adults how to camp. “I try to ‘wow’ them,” she says. “I show them how to bake a cake, chocolate eclairs, English muffin pizzas, and more in a cardboard box in front of the fire or in a Dutch oven. Muffins in an orange peel are always delicious and breakfast eggs in a baggie or cooked over a vagabond stove. People leave training thinking, ‘Wow, I can’t wait to do this the next time I go to camp!’”

When she’s not introducing people to camp, Susan loves to host gatherings at her home and to travel. In addition to the trips with the Senior Center, she has already traveled throughout the US and the Caribbean, and last year, she was lucky enough to travel to Italy twice—once for a planned vacation with a cruise to the Greek Islands and the second time for her niece’s wedding.

When at home, Susan and Dan like to get together with friends and family, enjoy the Adirondack parks, and to visit local attractions, especially the theaters like Capital Rep, MacHaydn,





SLOC, and Proctors, where Susan also volunteers her time.

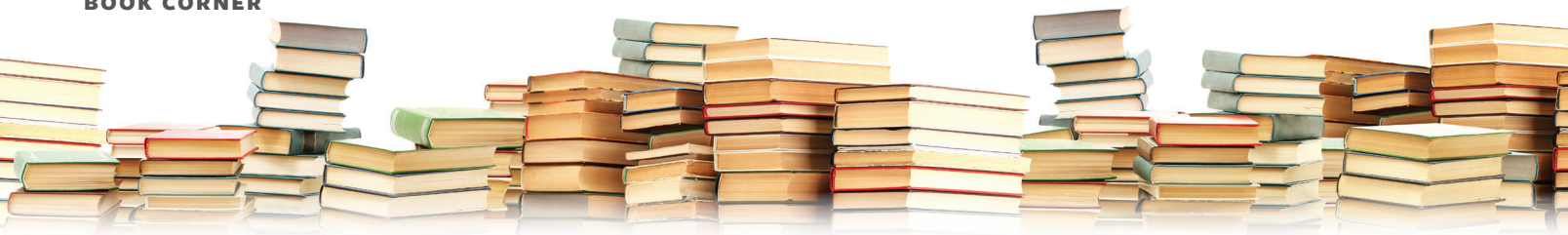
Susan is known for all her volunteer work, but many people don't realize she also loves to assemble and fix things like

grills, garage door openers, ceiling fans, and more. She doesn't like to have a lot of attention on herself. She prefers that the causes she works for receive all the limelight. But despite that, she has often been honored for her work with several

awards through the Girl Scouts, and last year she was named a 2022 Woman of Distinction. Eleven women are honored each year by Assemblywoman Mary Beth Walsh for their accomplishments within our region. It is a big honor, but Susan is just happy to play a part in making our community a better place to be for others. The most important thing to her is "bringing people together. Whether that be here at the Senior Center with the friendships that have formed or in Girl Scouts helping to create troops, train leaders, and share the experience with so many. I'm not one to put myself in the limelight. I like to sit back and watch it happen knowing that I was instrumental in the outcome," she says.

And she's going to keep working toward that goal as she looks to the future, where she wishes "good health and happiness for all. I believe it's important to stay active in body and mind. I believe if you show kindness, you'll receive kindness in return."

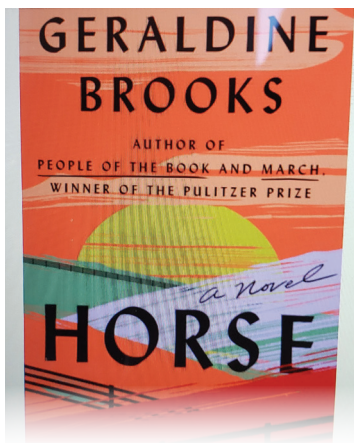
## BOOK CORNER



# Book Reviews

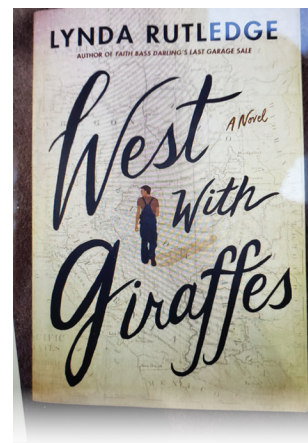
By Margaret Herlihy

Not usually one to look for books about animals, these two came across my purview recently and both were wonderful reads! Very different, but both historical fiction that transported you to a different time and place and engulfed your imagination.



### **HORSE** by Geraldine Brooks

A painting, a box of bones—these become the basic elements of the story about the fastest four-miler racehorse in history, Lexington, and his black trainer, Jarvet. It is an account of horse racing in the 1850s—the people and places and their connection to the world now, some 170 years later, along with the individuals who are now piecing together their story. It is a novel of love, anger, passion, and justice.



### **WEST WITH GIRAFFES** by Lynda Rutledge

Based on a real-life event about an orphaned teen and his trip across the country from New York City to the San Diego Zoo, this book will keep you engaged and intrigued. Set in 1938, it combines American history with tales of adventure, romance, and the bonding of a boy with two tall, gentle giants.