



East Village

Magazine

July 2024

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East Village Magazine

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Commentary

In our contentious times, election workers deserve our support

By Paul Rozycki

Every year during Independence Day celebrations, we honor those who did so much to defend our democratic way of life. Along with hoisting flags and launching fireworks, we pay tribute to those who risked their lives to form our nation and keep it safe.

There is no doubt that we owe much to those who defend democracy on the battlefield, but it's easy to forget that democracy also works and survives because of the quiet efforts of many on the home front: the election workers who prepare and mail ballots, set up polling stations, guide voters through the queues, and count ballots late into the night when election day is done.

Elections are the most essential part of any democratic society. But today we see election deniers reject the results of past votes, raise doubts over every detail of the election process, and vow to reject future election results with threats of violence if they don't like the outcome.

The events of Jan. 6, 2021 could be an indication of what might happen after the 2024 election. And for all the charges and countercharges exchanged by candidates during the campaign, all too often it's the local election workers who are caught in the midst of this partisan conflict.

Election workers facing major challenges

As we approach the August 6 primary and the November 5

general election, Genesee County election workers are up against many of the same challenges as others around the nation.

"Election workers are facing a myriad of challenges in their role in administering our elections," Genesee County Clerk/Register of Deeds Dominique Clemons told East Village Magazine. "As our society seems to be shifting, the general public has a tendency to be much less friendly than in past elections. Misinformation has led to some people going as far as yelling, challenging and even making direct threats to election workers."

He noted that the county's election workers are only applying the rules passed by legislators, and they deserve support for doing a difficult job.

"Election workers are members of our community who step up to work an election. They are not lawmakers, they are not decision makers, yet they are the face of our elections and often the ones who face harassment," he said. "When individuals go to a polling location, they should remember these community members are following a set of procedures set in state law and have no authority to make changes. They are human beings deserving of respect and kind treatment."

Clemons went on to say that individuals who don't like our elections system should contact their state legislators, and those who are unaware, unsure,

(Continued on Page 7)

Cover: A summer view down Kearsley Street. (Photo by Edwin D. Custer)



Photo of the Month: Visitors to the Flint Institute of Arts' annual Flint Art Fair peruse tables full of area artists' work on June 8, 2024. (Photo by Edwin D. Custer)

Education Beat

Flint Community Schools' 2023-2024 year by the numbers

By Harold C. Ford

The final weeks of Flint Community Schools' (FCS) 2023-2024 school year might be best understood by parsing the district's numbers.

The most important number may be five – the length, in years, of a new contract awarded to Superintendent Kevelin Jones on June 12. The agreement was called “unprecedented” by Flint Board of Education (FBOE) President Joyce Ellis-McNeal and represents a milestone for a district that has seen six superintendents in the last 10 years.

Other recent and relevant FCS numbers include:

- Nine veteran teachers with 231 years of experience in FCS left the district, and the contracts of ten guest teachers were not renewed.

- After 40 years in FCS, and 20 as athletic director, the position of athletic director Jamie

Foster was eliminated.

- FCS celebrated the high school graduation of 120 students, an uptick of over 40 students from the previous year.

- The final budget for 2023-2024 and the projected 2024-2025 budget show a combined fund balance deficit of nearly \$15 million.

- Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) financial support for FCS – totaling some \$150 million since 2021 – ends Sept. 30, 2024.

- Four fires at abandoned FCS properties were reported during an eight-hour period on May 11-12.

- Chronic absenteeism was reduced from 80 percent of FCS's student population in 2021-2022 to 75 percent in 2023-2024.

- FCS achieved five 18-month benchmarks as delineated in its school improvement plan.

Five-year contract for Jones

Kevelin Jones ascended to the FCS superintendency, replacing Anita Steward, from his assistant superintendent position in November 2021. At that time, he became the eighth superintendent in 16 years to head up Flint's public school system.

FBOE Trustee Terae King was credited by fellow Board members with the move to offer a five-year contract to Jones, ostensibly to provide greater stability to the district's leadership team. King's suggestion was initially made at an earlier board committee meeting.

The vote to approve the five-year contract for Jones passed 6-1. Affirmative votes were cast by Ellis-McNeal; King; Michael Clack, vice president; Claudia Perkins, secretary; Dylan

(Continued on Page 5)

Education Beat ...

(Continued from Page 4)

Luna, treasurer; and Laura MacIntyre, assistant secretary/treasurer. Trustee Melody Relerford cast the lone dissenting vote.

“This is a historic moment for our district,” said King.



Kevelin Jones, Superintendent of Flint Community Schools
(Photo by Tom Travis)

“I’m proud of you, I really am,” Perkins said to Jones. “You have a good leadership style.”

Traditionally, FCS superintendents have inked one-year contract renewals following a favorable annual performance review from members of the Board.

Twenty educators with 281 years of experience exit the district

At its meeting on May 15, the FBOE accepted the retirements of eight educators with nearly 230 years of experience in the classroom. Seven of the retirees were elementary-level teachers averaging more than 30 years in the classroom. A paraprofessional (retirement) and central administrator (resignation) also left the district.

Further, at the June 12 FBOE meeting, 10 “guest teachers” were dismissed due to “pro-

gram requirements [that were] not met.” Guest teachers are classroom educators with four-year college degrees who lack teaching certification and are expected to achieve certification in order to continue their employment with FCS.

The guest teacher program was adopted by the district in 2019 during the administration of former superintendent Derrick Lopez to help meet the district’s shortage of classroom teachers.

The most controversial recent departure from FCS employment was that of Jamie Foster, which was also made official at the June 12 meeting. The reason given in the printed board packet made available to the public was “position eliminated.”

Foster told East Village Magazine (EVM) that the simple declaration in the “personnel recommendations” section of the June 12 board packet was the first printed notice, of any kind, that he was being let go by the district. Foster said he had been employed by the district for 40 years, the past 20 as its athletic director.

Representatives from the Congress of Flint School Administrators turned out to oppose the manner of Foster’s dismissal. Congress President Eddie Thomas called the termination a “lack of respect for its members.”

FCS central administrator Ernest Steward warned that Foster’s sudden departure may lead to the absence of a fall sports schedule for Flint schools.

School district attorney Timothy Gardner of Thrun Law Firm defended the move, saying Michigan law does not put an athletic director in the same category as other school administrators such as a superintendent, assistant superintendent, principals, and others.

Rather, Gardner said, an

athletic director falls into a less protected employment status, as do food service supervisors, transportation directors, and the like.

Uptick to 120 graduates

Board members lauded the number of FCS high school graduates in 2024.

The district’s website listed 120 Flint grads in the class of 2024, which Clack said was an improvement over the district’s 79 graduates in 2023 at a May 8 FBOE meeting.

Data found at the MI School Data website, operated by the Michigan Department of Education, provides the following data about the “graduation/dropout rate” at Flint schools for the graduating class of 2023: the “graduation rate” was 35 percent (62 of 177 students); the “dropout rate” was 34.5 percent (61 of 177 students); the “off-track continuing” rate was 30.5 percent (54 of 177 students).

Data for the 2024 graduating class at FCS has not yet been posted at the state’s website.

Budget challenged by two-year deficit totaling nearly \$15 million

FCS Finance Director Chandra Cleaves reviewed the district’s final budget numbers for 2023-2024 and presented the FBOE with a proposed 2024-2025 budget at its June 18 session.

The final budget for 2023-2024, included revenue totaling \$164,072,275, expenditures of \$168,780,350, and a fund balance deficit of \$4,708,075.

The 2024-2025 budget beginning July 1 – based, in part, on a projected FCS student enrollment of 2,700 students – projects a revenue amount of

(Continued on Page 6)

Education Beat ...

(Continued from Page 5)

\$77,100,548, expenditures totaling \$87,103,226, and a fund balance deficit of \$10,002,678.

The projected two-year deficit amounts – together exceeding \$14.7 million – add to the long-term indebtedness of the district. In a Nov. 8, 2023 appearance before the FBOE, Michael Rice, Michigan Superintendent of Public Instruction, told the Board: “You need to accelerate your progress both financially and academically.”

In December 2023, the district was passed over by the state in legislation that provided debt relief to six other Michigan school districts including two that were closed. A public statement released by

Jones in January said the district was saddled with “approximately \$56,093,404 in debt, with an operational deficit of \$14,420,492.”

ESSER financial support for the district – totaling some \$150 million since 2021 – ends on Sept. 30 of this year. After that date, ESSER dollars that have been used in recent years for ongoing repairs and upgrades at FCS buildings that average over 70 years old – among the oldest in the nation – will no longer be available.

Adding to future financial concerns are upcoming contract negotiations with two employee unions whose members service the district – the Congress of Flint School Ad-

ministrators and paraprofessionals represented by Service Employees International Union Local 517.

Four fires in eight hours

There were four fires reported at abandoned FCS buildings in an eight-hour span between May 11 to May 12.

- At about 11 p.m. on Saturday, May 11 a fire was reported at a building on the aban-



The former Apprentice Building on the abandoned Central-Whittier campus in Flint

(Photo by Edwin D. Custer)

doned Central-Whittier campus on Crapo St.

- At the same campus, a half-hour later, there was another fire in Central High School’s former wood shop building.

- On May 12, at about 2 a.m. Flint firefighters responded to a fire in the cafeteria of the abandoned Flint Northern High School on Mackin Rd. on Flint’s west side.

- Five hours later, at about 7 a.m., firefighters responded to a first-floor classroom fire at the vacant and condemned McKinley Middle School, situated along Hemphill Rd. on Flint’s south side.

For years, dozens of individuals have appeared before at FBOE meetings to express their

concerns about the approximate two-dozen abandoned school buildings in Flint, including Flint City Councilman Quincy Murphy in December 2022, and Flint Fire Chief Theron Wiggins in February 2023.

Absenteeism improves five percent, five benchmarks reached

Chronic absenteeism

among the district’s student population declined by five percent, from 80 percent in the 2021-2022 school year to 75 percent in the 2023-2024 school year, according to Kelly Fields, FCS Director of Academics.

At the June 18 meeting of the FBOE, Fields described chronic absenteeism as when a student is

absent 10 percent or more of the days they are enrolled in school.

Fields also cited five 18-month benchmarks that were achieved by the district intended “to develop and increase operational efficiency [and] to improve the academic and social-emotional learning of FCS scholars.”

The benchmarks reached by FCS included: “governance,” “improve scholar attendance,” “install a technology-based platform for human resources,” “professional learning for district and building leaders,” and “a plan to provide certified teachers in all K-12 classrooms.”

Flint Community Schools’ 2024-2025 school year begins on August 7. ●

Commentary ...

(Continued from Page 3)

or are skeptical of the process should sign up to be poll workers.

“Many people who become poll workers are surprised at just how many rules, checks and balances, and specific procedures are required to administer our elections securely,” Clemons said.

Not only have current partisan divisions placed new demands on election workers, but recent changes in Michigan’s election laws have made the job more challenging and created the need for more workers.

Changes in Michigan election laws impact workers

Changes in Michigan’s election laws that allow for early in-person voting and easier absentee voting place a larger burden on election workers.

“There have been a flurry of changes in Michigan election law that expands the rights of voters, makes voting more accessible as well as additional security standards and protocols,” Clemons said. “All of these changes result in significantly more work for clerks and election workers. Most notably being the expansion of our voting system to include 9 days of early in-person voting.”

Clemons noted the new laws “put a lot on the plates” of local election workers, including maintaining voting equipment, poll books and other technology.

“The security standards on this technology [are] incredibly high and certainly can be a challenge to poll workers who are not well versed in technology,” he said. “There is no room for error in an election and our election workers face a series of very stringent rules and protocol for every step...”

The need for more election workers

With all these changes and challenges, the demand for election workers remains strong, and Clemons underscored the increased need for election workers during what may prove a contentious election year.

“It is always a challenge finding individuals to work the election. With raised safety concerns, misinformation, and complexity of our election system, many poll workers are choosing to not work elections anymore,” he said.

The clerk added that the county’s cities and townships are “always” looking for election workers, and as many current workers are growing older, there is also a need for younger people “to start getting involved in the process.”

With both an August primary and general election in November, and with many offices on the ballot, a surprising number of workers are required to fulfill the election needs for all the local governments in Genesee County.

Clemons estimated the county will require “between 600-700 election workers” who are hired individually by each of the county’s 28 municipalities.

Not only must each city or township clerk “hire poll workers to work Election Day precincts, nine days of early voting, absentee counting boards and election night receiving boards,” Clemons added, “clerks also must attempt to strike a balance in the political party of poll workers at each site.”

In a year when democracy itself seems to be on the line, we should give credit and support to those workers as they take on a difficult job of making the most basic parts of democracy work.

After all, they are as important to American democracy as the soldiers we celebrate with flags and fireworks on July 4. ●

Unclassified Ads

Apartment for Lease

Two-bedroom second floor apartment on cul-de-sac Avon St. near Kearsley St. Features appliances, dining set, laundry, off street fenced parking, large back yard, garden plot. On site management. \$850 a month plus electricity. Heat and water included. No pets. References and credit check requested. E-mail: ecuster@sbcglobal.net or write: Apartment Box 1, 720 E. Second St., Flint 48503.

Apartment for Lease

Three-bedroom two story apartment. Features hardwood floors, appliances, 1 1/2 baths, laundry, garden plot, off street fenced parking. In the center of it all on cul-de-sac Avon near Kearsley St. Walk three blocks or less to UM-F, MCC, Cultural Center, parks, Downtown. References and credit check requested. On site management. \$895 per month plus all utilities. No pets. E-mail: ecuster@sbcglobal.net or write: Apartment Box 9, 720 E. Second St., Flint MI 48503.

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THIS MONTH IN THE VILLAGE

A selection of events available to our readers is highlighted — beginning after our publication date of July 1. It's a sampling of opportunities in the city. To submit events for our August issue, email info about your event to pisenber@gmail.com by July 20.

Tunes at Noon

Mon.-Fri., July 8-Aug. 16, 11:45 a.m. to 1:15 p.m.
Bring your lunch to the park and enjoy 90 minutes of free music featuring jazz, blues, gospel and more by Michigan musicians.
Willson Park, downtown Flint

Middle East Festival

Fri.-Sun., July 12 - 14, 5 p.m.
Our Lady of Lebanon is hosting a Middle East Festival promising Mediterranean cuisine, belly dancers, a beer tent, live music, kids games and a fireworks show on Friday and Saturday nights. Admission is free. Parking is \$5.
4133 Calkins Rd., Flint
For more info visit mideastfestival.com.

Patio Night at the FIA

July 12, 19, 26, 6 - 7:30 p.m.
Fridays in July and August, the FIA partners with FIM's Music Around Town series to a free music event on the FIA's Palette Cafe patio.
For more info visit flintarts.org
or call
810-234-1695

Flint City Bucks

Sat., July 13, 7 p.m.
The Bucks against South Bend.
Atwood Stadium
701 University Ave., Flint
Tickets: General Admission Adult \$12, Youth: \$5 VIP Section Adults \$18, Youth \$10
For more info visit flintcitybucks.com.

Alley Fest

Sat., July 13, 2 - 10 p.m.
Friends of the Alley will host an all day festival in Buckham Alley celebrating Flint's urban spaces and local music. Sixteen bands will play and 50+ vendors selling food, and more throughout in alley. Admission is free.
Buckham Alley, Flint

20 Years of Beautification Celebration

Thurs., July 18, 3 p.m. - 7 p.m.
Celebrating the 20th anniversary with food, music, outdoor games, and resources from community partners and a program at 5:30pm. The event is free and meant for all ages.
630 W. Kearsley St., Flint

5th Annual Carriage Town Porchfest

Flint's Carriage Town neighborhood encourages neighbors and visitors to join them for an outdoor music and art-filled celebration for one night each summer. Expect local artists performing on historic homes' porches and showcasing their work along sidewalks and fences, food trucks, and an area for the kiddos to play, too.
W. First Avenue and Mason St., Flint

Community Festival Celebration

Sat., July 20, 12 noon to 5 p.m.
Enjoy this free fun event for the whole family featuring games, prizes, live entertainment, a silent auction, vendors and more.
Free and open to the public.
Berston Field House
3300 Saginaw St., Flint
For more info visit version.org or call 810-787-6531.

Indiana Joel's Magic Show

Sat., July 20, 12 noon to 1 p.m.
Adventure books are brought to life with amazing, wacky stunts, upbeat music and lots of audience participation
Gloria Coles Flint Public Library
1026 E. Kearsley St., Flint
For more info visit www.fpl/events/month or call 810-232-7111.

"Vehicle Cities of the Dead" Bike Tour

Sun., July 21, 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.
Visit historic Flint cemeteries some not visible to the untrained eye. Professor Thomas Henthorn (UMFlint) is your guide. Will take 2.5 to 3 hours. Tour starts and ends at Queens' Provisions. For adults 21 and over, \$15.
Queens' Provisions
421 Garland St., Flint
For more info visit flintcitybiketours.com.

Movies Under the Stars

Fri., July 26 | 7:30 p.m.
Communities First Inc.'s movie series is back on City Hall's lawn. A pre-movie party starts at 7:30 p.m. with free games, activities and snacks. At dusk, guests will be able to watch "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Mutant Mayhem." Registration and your own blanket or lawn chair is encouraged.
Flint City Hall (lawn)
1101 S. Saginaw St., Flint



Ed Custer's East Village Magazine logo is reimagined for each issue by Patsy Isenberg.

'Imagine Flint' Comprehensive Plan update is underway

By Kate Stockrahm

With one month down in a roughly 18-month engagement timeline, an update to the City of Flint's "Imagine Flint" Comprehensive Plan is now underway."

The plan, which acts as a guideline for Flint's land use and future development, was originally adopted in October 2013 following a visioning process that spanned nearly two years and included over 200 community meetings across Flint's nine wards.

And now, a little over 11 years later, the city's Planning Commission

and Business and Community Services Department say it's time to take another look.

"So... what is the purpose of a [comprehensive] plan?" Emily Doerr, director of Business and Community Services, asked her 7th Ward audience at a plan update kick-off meeting on June 11, 2024. "I can kind of cheekily say, like, 'Well, it's because state law requires it.' That's true."

The Planning and Enabling Act does require the update, she continued with a smile, but beyond that,

an updated comprehensive plan also helps Flint residents fully realize the vision their plan outlines.

"It helps us write grants at the city to fund things that you guys want to see happen," she explained.

Doerr went on a month-long tour in June to reintroduce the plan and its update process to residents and stakeholders in each of Flint's nine wards, with the idea that her team and other appropriate city departments will then follow up by hosting feedback sessions on specific portions of the plan, like economic development or public health, in July and August.

Those sessions will all be held at the Gloria Coles Flint Public Library at 2 p.m., and so far the established dates and topics include:

- July 11 – Economic Development
- July 18 – Environment/Open Space
- July 25 – Infrastructure/Transportation
- Aug. 1 – Public Health and Safety
- Aug. 8 – Housing
- Aug 15 – Land Use

Doerr noted that she is also working on putting together an education-focused session and that all of the topics will be repeated during meetings in September. Those dates are still to be determined.

As for an overall timeline for the update, Doerr said her department will be working to complete at least 50 community meetings from September 2024 - September 2025 in partnership with the Crim Fitness Foundation's Department of Neighborhood Impact.

Assuming that happens on time, she said she hopes to see an

(Continued on Page 10)

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'Imagine Flint' ...

(Continued from Page 9)

updated comprehensive plan adopted by December 2025.

However, Doerr added, if that's not doable based on what she and her team hear during these feedback sessions, they won't rush it.

"If it doesn't happen by December of '25, we're not going to get in trouble," she said. "It's actually a good thing because that means we

have even more people who want to give feedback."

To offer feedback, which is not limited to outlined session topics but can include anything in the current plan, residents can:

- Drop off written feedback at dropboxes set up at Hasselbring Senior Center (1002 W. Home Ave.), the Latinx Technology & Community Center (2101 Lewis St.), or the Mott Park Clubhouse (2401 Nolen Drive);
- Mail written feedback to

City Hall (1101 S. Saginaw St.) with "Attn: Zoning Coordinator" in the address line;

- Submit typed input online at cityofflint.com/department/bcs, where a form will soon be made available;
- Or attend one of the upcoming community meetings through the next year.

Flint's current comprehensive plan can be viewed at imagineflint.com.

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Flint Under the Stars

Country

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FIM Capitol Theatre

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FIM Capitol Theatre

Movies at Capitol Theatre

SEEKING WRITERS

East Village Magazine is searching for community journalists! Ideal candidates are curious, engaged Flint residents who want to help keep their neighbors informed of the local news that affects them most. EVM writers receive free training, story writing and editing support, and payment for each published story. (We also have pretty great snacks at our monthly writers meetings.) If you're interested in getting involved, please email us at eastvillagemagazineflint@gmail.com with the subject line "Community Journalist."

Village Life ...

(Continued from Page 12)

of the island and touched them lightly. In the hand, their stems were solid and their crisscrossed cut designs sparkled.

“These are some of my favorite things,” I found myself saying to my old friend. “I love these glasses. I don’t know how to explain it, but they make me feel like I’ve had a life – like I’ve accomplished something.”

And I need beauty, I told him. The older I get, I said, the more I want something solid to hold in my hand, something tangible and lovely.

My glasses didn’t interest Tomasi much.

He’s not quite monastic but not far from it. He’s traveled with only a backpack for most of his life. The idea of owning something that could break - loving the luxury of it - was almost wholly outside his experience.

I confess I felt a bit ashamed of how much I love my Waterford glasses. How superficial could I be? How could these things, these ultimately breakable luxuries, be what I’d have to offer to our ruminations about what life means?

On the other hand, it occurred to me that perhaps trying to arrive at the meaning of life, in the midst of simply telling the stories of our decades apart, was asking too much. But since stories were the agenda of the day, I felt duty-bound to tell him how the glasses came to be.

How I’d bought them the day after a terrible evening, when I’d gotten into a bruisingly bitter fight with someone and threw him out of my house.

How the next day, wounded and shocked by the slurs and shouts tossed back and forth, I felt that I deserved something great, something extravagant.

I bought those glasses in a hot rage of reparation.

I tried to say to Tomasi, “sometimes things are more reliable than people. Sometimes things are comforting. Sometimes that’s the only comfort there is.”

And then I said, “I couldn’t go back to the life we had in Tonga now if you paid me. I couldn’t deal with it.”

I pulled the cork out of a drinkable red and poured his Waterford goblet full. He smiled at me and took it gratefully in hand. He was too gracious, too loving to judge me for my love of crystal. And the afternoon went on.

And when our anecdotes from the past flagged just a little, and when we had laughed until our sides hurt and we’d said we loved each other a dozen times, he said his feet were cold.

We’d all kicked off our shoes and sprawled by that time on various couches and the carpeted floor.

“My feet are freezing,” Tomasi said.

“Ah-hah! I have just the thing,” I said, realizing this might be a joyful moment.

From one of my husband’s drawers, I pulled out a thick pair of beautiful socks salvaged from my dead sister’s hoards last fall.

These socks are the greatest, I told Tomasi.

I’ve never seen somebody take so much pleasure in putting on a pair of socks.

It was a slow dance. He did one at a time, of course, pulling

it up over his yoga-splayed toes, up over his chilly calves and settling each one just so.

My dead sister’s socks – which she might have stolen (but that’s another story) – were perfect on Tomasi’s feet.

His face crinkled with smiles, and I was hoping he was happy.

“I thought we’d be talking about the meaning of life,” he said, “but all we’re doing is laughing.”

And then he sighed and said, “I love these socks.”

And that’s how I came to remember that we all love something – even a pair of socks. Even my most frugal friend only reluctantly took off those socks when it was time to go.

I have asked myself repeatedly since, why did I let him give them back? He peeled them off almost as dramatically as when he put them on. And the idea that Tomasi loved my dead sister’s (probably purloined) socks was really the perfect caper to a fabulous day.

Finally, I got his address – a yoga retreat somewhere in India – and I’m sending him the socks.

So, there’s one path to closure about what life means. Or not. We hadn’t really found the answer. Instead, we had a single joyful day of celebrating Waterford and socks – and all the stories in between.

***Editor’s Note:** Tomasi, who is now 71, is still roaming the world. He just completed a mountainous walking tour of Tibet and is headed to India for three weeks in a Zen monastery. ●*

Village Life **We were all beautiful once**

By Jan Worth-Nelson

This Village Life column originally appeared in the March 2014 issue of East Village Magazine. It is reprinted and updated from Jan Worth-Nelson's newest book, "That's My Moon Over Court Street: Dispatches from a Life in Flint," which is available at Totem Books, Sloan Museum, Amazon.com, or by donating \$50 or more to EVM for a signed copy.

Tomasi and I leaned over the kitchen island, taking a break from a long afternoon of reminiscing.

Until the night before, we hadn't seen each other for 30 years. When we'd picked him up at the airport, I recognized him immediately, but I was struck by his face – the face of a 61-year-old man, now beautifully creased from years of unconventional international traipsing. With time, it has evolved into a deeply kind and handsome face.

It was a face I had known only when he was a rambunc-

tious young explorer of the world, a legendary Peace Corps volunteer in Tonga who opted for the most remote assignments, at Niuatopatapu, for example, an island populated by only a few hundred people, plus lime trees, banana plants, unruly pigs, and a hirsute blanket of coconut palms.

When he came down to the capital city once or twice a year for provisions, he always made news.

He swayed between asceticism – he'd do yoga for hours a day – and cathartic partying, outdrinking the Tonga Club's

to find a kava party far after closing time.

He was a beautiful boy. We always forgave him those bipolar Dionysian episodes because at heart there was something innocent about him, sweet and serious.

And now he was here in my place and we were talking about the meaning of life. A 61-year-old man and a 64-year-old woman who shared many youthful memories of that intense little country in the tropics many decades ago. The moment was going to be bittersweet.

As William Carlos Williams once said, "Achh, we were all beautiful once."

How can you not talk about the meaning of life in such a circumstance? If that's not a time to bring the wine out, I don't know what is.

And I knew what I needed.

From the upper shelf of a cupboard, I pulled out some of my most treasured possessions – four Waterford crystal goblets. I stood them in a row on the sanded wood top

(Continued on Page 11)



Jan Worth-Nelson's treasured Waterford glasses.

(Photo by Jan Worth-Nelson)

beer supply, leaving behind brown glass forests of Steinlager bottles as he emerged from that dank open-air watering hole, stumbling out in the moonlight