

UP FRONT



NEIGHBORHOOD STORIES

By Bette McDevitt

Millvale

Heavy black clouds crouched over Millvale the evening of April 10. If anyone knows when to look skyward, it would be the people of Millvale. The most recent flood, during Hurricane Ivan in 2004, sent water from a small stream (with the innocent-sounding name of Gerty's Run) roaring down North Avenue, reaching a height of four feet. "The flood control project is still working, but you could have put the town on the north rim of the Grand Canyon and it still would have flooded in that storm," said Millvale Mayor James Burn, quoted in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* at the time.

But the hint of rain did not deter people in Millvale from coming out for a gathering at Lincoln P&G Diner that evening. It was to be a special evening of sharing photos, documents, and memorabilia, and swapping memories for people who have made their home in the small town along the Allegheny River.

Jennifer Cohen, who is a partner in ownership of Lincoln Pharmacy and Lincoln P&G Diner, has the perfect place for a gathering, with lots of space and a reputation for good food. The diner is part of Pamela's restaurants, known for crispy pancakes. Pamela is Jennifer's sister, and both women have roots in Millvale, since their great uncle and grandfather founded Lincoln Pharmacy in 1928, and their father continued the business.



Wayne Thompson hangs a painting of Lincoln Pharmacy by Pittsburgh artist Robert Huckstein.



Richard Senk poses with his family's confirmation treasures.

"I came in to help out my Dad for few days, 30 years ago," Jennifer recalls, "and I've been here ever since."

Millvale is coming up on its 150th anniversary in 2018, and since her father had chaired the 100th celebration, Jennifer Cohen felt obliged to get things moving for this anniversary. So she invited everyone in the borough to come to the diner to gather historical information for the event. "We all know each other in this community," said Jennifer.

The diner put out a spread, and Jean Marc Chatellier (a French master baker with a shop across the street) made a cake. Jennifer had a plan in which people would divide into groups, lay out their photos, and take turns looking at each group's collections. But the folks had another agenda. They wanted to shake hands, hug each other, settle into the booths, and talk about old times.

Jack Cavanaugh had a folder of local documents and proclamations he was showing around. "The oldest one is from 1886. I'm going to give some of them to the library. My dad used to be mayor here. He's right over there," he said with a nod. "He's 92."

Richard Senk did not bring his treasures inside, as they were delicate, but from the trunk of his car he unwrapped tissue paper and carefully held up his grandmother's 100-year-old confirmation dress, and his mother's confirmation dress and baptismal gown, all in perfect condition. "They were both confirmed at St. Anthony's," he said, gesturing toward the church at the end of the block.

Gloria Brown, who had the bluest eyes in the room, has been working at Lincoln Pharmacy for 61 years, but has been coming there even longer. "We used to come here and hang out after the football game, and when we'd get too noisy, Mr. Cohen would make us leave and we'd go to the other drug store down the street, but we'd be back the next week." Now she does a little bookkeeping for Jennifer, a couple days a week. "Mr. Cohen made a point of offering me a job when my husband became bedfast with tuberculosis, and we had small children. They've been good to me, real good to me," she said.

The high point for Jennifer was the arrival of Wayne Thompson, carrying a large oil painting. "Oh, my gosh! Look at

that!" she exclaimed. It was a painting of Lincoln Pharmacy by Pittsburgh artist Robert Huckstein, known for his realistic style. Wayne hung it on the wall and stepped back to savor the moment. Jennifer had known of the painting, but didn't know what had become of it after it was sold at an early Three Rivers Arts Festival. Wayne found it when he was hunting down treasures. "I took it off the wall of an Integra Bank! It was closing down, and they were selling off all the stuff. When I saw this, I said 'I've got to buy this one!'"

Not much official work was done that evening, but that was all right with Jennifer. "We'll do the planning at the next gathering," she said. She can count on that next meeting. There is a particular tenacity built into the community that has held on for so long.

To learn more about Millvale, check out the recent Rick Sebak documentary, *It's Pittsburgh and A Lot of Other Stuff: The Joys of Millvale*. 🌀

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Sue Seidl examines Millvale's history.

Millvale residents look over their second grade photos.
All photos by Bette McDevitt.