

QUINTESSENTIAL PEOPLE

PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

MARGO GROSSPIETSCH

How Does Your Garden Grow?

Resilient
Inspiring
Resourceful
Accepting
Energetic
Loving
Wise
Honest
Humble
Joyful
Altruistic
Compassionate
Uncompromising

“MARGO ALWAYS WANTS TO KNOW ‘YOUR STORY.’ MARGO ALWAYS ASKS, ‘WHAT EXPERIENCES DID YOU HAVE THAT SHAPED YOU?’ SHE BELIEVES WE CAN LEARN BEST WHEN WE HEAR THE STORIES, AND THAT CHILDREN NEED TO HEAR MORE LIFE STORIES. HER STORY IS SO INTERESTING THAT YOU ARE DUMBFOUNDED WITH WHAT SHE WENT THROUGH TO RAISE HER FAMILY AS A YOUNG WIDOW. SHE NEVER FORGETS TO TELL YOU ABOUT THE INSTRUMENTAL PEOPLE WHO HELPED HER ALONG THE WAY THROUGH THEIR COMPASSION AND CARE.”

–RITA WOJNOWSKI

BY LISA STAMOS

MARGO GROSSPIETSCH REMEMBERS many of the life experiences that shaped her. She recalls that her mother, a traditional housewife, was a bright and well-read woman. Things were good for Margo, her three brothers, and her parents in the late 1930s and early 1940s, though she recalls that other families struggled through the Depression era. Being the daughter of a prominent North Shore attorney provided security during tough times, and she recalls her father's optimism as influential.

It was these early influences that led this extraordinary wife, mother, grandmother, day care provider, and volunteer to a life of service to others. During her amazing life, she has raised 12 children of her own following the tragic death of her husband, in addition to providing day care and babysitting for the children of many Barrington families. She has more "grandchildren" (biological as well as honorary) than she can count. And she spends her life in service to others through her church and charitable activities.

Raised in Glencoe, Illinois, Margo enjoyed an active life that included outdoor ice skating and a variety of social service projects. Her most prominent childhood memories reflect an early grasp of social justice and the value of service to others. Margo remembers that as a child she knitted quilt squares that would be assembled into blankets for the British children who were evacuated to the countryside during the World War II German air raids on London.

She also cultivated a love of gardening, which dates back to her work in the war-era Victory Gardens as a child. Margo can be seen these days tending to her community garden plot at Ron Beese Park in Barrington. Also in the 1940s, during Hollywood's Golden Age, Margo made her national appearance in an RKO Pictures Pathé newsreel that was shown along with the black and white movies of the day, appearing as a "poster child" for the "Clean Plate Club" (a campaign begun by President Harry Truman to encourage children to eat everything on their plates to conserve resources during the postwar years). Today, Margo helps fill plates and lift the spirits of others who are in need every week at the Emmaus House Sunday Night Community Dinner in Lake Zurich (see page 86).

In Glencoe, Margo experienced a religious, ethnic, and financial diversity that influenced her. A simple eighth-grade moment, one where Margo witnessed discrimination, changed her life. "I had two friends with me, and the three of us were paying a social call to another friend's home. I was allowed in, but my girlfriends, one black and one Jewish, were turned away. I decided right then and there that I didn't want to be a part of this type of life. I would be a welcoming person," Margo says.

She had a "good education," attending New Trier High School. She spent close to three years at Saint Mary's College, where for a time she was near the head of her class. There, a young man attending Notre Dame, John Grosspietsch, noticed Margo at a basketball game. He called her, and they went out on a date. In 1955 they were married, settling down first in St. Joseph, Michigan,

and eventually in the northwest suburbs. In the late 1960s they moved to Barrington. Margo recalls, "We loved the area and found a home with six bedrooms – enough space for our ten children at the time – that we could afford."

Margo and John's second child, Joseph, was born with severe mental and physical handicaps, which included his inability to speak. The young parents rose to the challenge of raising their special child. "In those days," Margo says, "sometimes kind words were not spoken about such children, even within the medical community. We must learn to tell the truth with each other – but gently." Joseph died soon after his thirteenth birthday.

Tragedy would strike the Grosspietsch family again. When Margo was seven months' pregnant with her twelfth child, her husband was in a fatal car accident while driving to visit his father. There was no life insurance. She lost her home. Yet, she didn't lose her faith, and it took the village, showing up in force, to help her raise the children and keep them together during a time of almost insurmountable needs. The list of names is long, yet Margo remembers them all. Parishoners from St. Anne Catholic Church, school principals, and friends and neighbors came together, and together they made it all work.

Margo's love of children became part of the family's solution. She enhanced her natural abilities with raising children by taking child development classes at Harper College. Margo helped other working parents with babysitting support while she earned an income of her own. When asked how she manages to raise so many children – her own and others' – she says, "Well, I use a few phrases that seem to work, like 'What's the rule?' or, 'You're not finished!' The affirmative 'great job' or 'I sure like the way you did that' also helps."

Margo Grosspietsch is an extraordinary mother, volunteer, and caregiver who has nurtured a growing garden of love, joy, humor, and compassion throughout our community.

Read on to see what others in our community have said about her.



PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

HERE ARE SOME WORDS THAT OTHERS SHARED ABOUT MARGO GROSSPIETSCH.

PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO



Merilee Blake

I first met Margo about 14 years ago when I joined the Children's Liturgy Ministry at St. Francis de Sales in Lake Zurich. I don't know anyone with a bigger heart for others, especially for children and anyone in need. Her faith and generosity of spirit are such an inspiration to me. Her life has not been easy (raising 12 children as a young widow, and losing a beloved son who had faced many challenges in his young life). Yet not once have I heard her complain or say an unkind word about anyone. She knows what is truly important and never wavers in her willingness to serve the Lord and the people he brings into her life. She has such a gift for engaging children and making each one feel important. Often during our Masses for Children, we will have the children join in the procession, and Margo is usually leading them like the Pied Piper, with great joy and enthusiasm. She is truly a blessing in my life. Thank you for featuring this local hero. I can't think of anyone who deserves it more!

Anne Braasch

My mom is an inspiration. She has faced many challenges and continues to cherish life and give to others. Her enthusiasm for service and social justice is unmatched. I remember that big pot with something good simmering on the stove every day. She loves gardening and good food – always did.

Rev. Dr. Jane Kunzie-Brunner

Margo is the babysitter for our daughter, Kathryn, and she is our parenting mentor. Like many first-time parents, we had no idea how to raise a baby. When we met Margo, the panic went away, or at least was greatly diminished. She has taught us so much about children and about life. Her cheerful greeting in the morning and throughout the day gives us energy and a perspective of gratitude. We often ask, "How did God put so much joy in a package so small?" Margo is the most reassuring person I have ever met. She has brought such joy to our lives. Margo is a personal hero and a great inspiration. She is our champion of family life.

Bob Gorman

Margo serves with me on the board of Emmaus House of Hospitality (see sidebar on page 86). At one of our board meetings, she was adamant about changing a rule we had: Only one family member could enter our Harvest Room, where our guests can pick up and bring home food. She said that the unintended consequence of that rule was to separate babies from their mothers and that it caused little ones to be afraid and to cry. Because of Margo, mothers can now bring their babies with them into the Harvest Room. No one else saw this need. Margo did, and she wouldn't back down until something was done to address it. Margo is a joy. She hugs and kisses people – outward signs of what she must be feeling inside toward those in her daily orbit. Margo is a free spirit in the best sense of that term. Her candor and caring are refreshing and uplifting.

Deenie Grosspietsch

I'm "number eight," a daughter. My mom's energy, creativity, and ingenuity are amazing. She put systems together to automate the functions of our daily life: Dirty clothes went down the chute, got washed and then sorted for each family member with the use of an old metal shelving unit, and dishpans were labeled for every family member – four shelves with three dishpans per shelf. She always said you have to set up the environment and everything else would fall into place. She had a routine for kids depending on their age. Dinner was on split shifts, the youngest first and then the oldest. The oldest always had to look out for the youngest: Open car doors for them, make sure they had their shoes, serve them first. Looking back, I think it worked in eliminating a lot of rivalry that can take place in families. When my father died, we had to move to more affordable lodgings. She was on her own raising 12 kids. It was sad, we were all sad. She did take with her two cars and her kids. One day one of the cars was gone. I heard that my mom gave it to the mailman because his wife left him and took the car. Who does that? Margo. She operates with humility. For a woman on a fixed income, she has no business buying tires for a man down on his luck. But she did, of course, and gave that man the dignity he needed to keep his job and support his family. One of her favorite sayings was, "To be grown up, you need to master the three Rs: not reading, writing, and arithmetic, but respect, reciprocity, and responsibility."

Jim Grosspietsch

Margo is passionate. She is passionate about helping those in need. She is passionate about her family. She is passionate about gardening and birding. She is passionate about children and making sure they all reach their potential. She is passionate about her faith. And she's also passionate about life in general, engaging each day with conviction and desire. Margo has, in addition to her own kids, been a day care provider for more than 100 Barrington area children during the past 35 years. That's an extraordinary amount of diaper changing, potty training, and lunches. The age ranges for those kids are six weeks to five years old. Some kids were with her during all four or five pre-kindergarten years while their parents worked full-time jobs.

John Grosspietsch

My mom has great curiosity and never does things halfway. She always wants to get at the root of things, whether it is gardening or making Italian sausage from scratch for homemade pizza. As a teenager, it was how she let me explore different hobbies and make a mess around the house from time to time. I especially remember the modest but special birthday, or Christmas gifts like the personal six-pack of Coca-Cola.

Tom Grosspietsch

I am Margo's third-oldest of 12 children. Margo is a great example of how to live a good, honest life. When we were little she would not tell us about Santa Claus because that would be lying. When I messed up in my teen years she would come right out and say it. She made me own my mistakes and was straight to the point. She holds herself to those same high standards. No hypocrisy. Lots of people talk the talk (and she can do that – she was first in her college class for a time), but she walks the walk. A few years ago my mom drove to the northwest side of Chicago early one morning to help immigrants become U.S. citizens – in a major snowstorm. At the time she had to be in her late 60s or early 70s.

Beth and Charlie Hutchinson

Margo came into our lives about 30 years ago when we moved into the neighborhood. What a friendly and enthusiastic lady we found her to be. Her daughter, Deenie, and our daughter, Ann, became friends at Lines School, which totally sealed a lasting bond for us all. Always with an opinion on how to better the world, she is a true gem. We will always prefer to be on her side of the fence, as we know she has done her homework. Margo raised a large family and did it alone after the death of her husband. Everyone admires the strength and courage she continues to show and marvels at how she was able to rear such outstanding citizens in her children with limited resources. I think she had so much love to offer and was the perfect example of how to achieve success in spite of hardships. Charlie and I have gardened for a number of years near Margo's plot, so we manage to stay in touch and share the joys of producing fresh vegetables as our gardens grow each year. You have to love a gardener. It is truly hard work. So, Margo, best wishes to you. You deserve this special honor and we will look forward to seeing you at the garden plots in the spring.

Mary Irving

I'm Margo's first daughter, born after three boys. Margo is an amazing, one-of-a-kind person, and is loyal to her beliefs. My father was called a creative genius. I noticed examples of that as a young girl. I realize now that my mother,

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*“One of [Margo’s] favorite sayings was,
“To be grown up, you need to master the three Rs:
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–DEENIE GROSSPIETSCH

in a different way, was one, too. Recently I was with the mom of three young boys. I have younger children also. The three boys were becoming active and the mom apologized. I told her not to worry about me; I grew up with seven brothers. The woman stopped, gave me a look and said, “That’s crazy.” I didn’t get to the part about also having four sisters, or growing up without our father. Sometimes crazy is good. Thankfully there were all kinds of wonderful people in the community who helped the family in different ways; from that, I learned about quiet generosity and empathy.

Kathy Mrzlak

Some tips from Margo’s kitchen: a half-gallon block of ice cream sliced down the middle lengthwise and then sliced six times crosswise makes 12 equal slices and avoids fights. It’s okay to have pancakes for dinner; when you get tired of pancakes, make cornbread. Pre-prepared PB&J sandwiches in the freezer make for a quick grab-and-go school lunch – they’ll thaw by the time the lunch bell rings (frozen peanut butter sandwiches aren’t very good; sorry, Mom!). Margo believes her life has been truly blessed by those in the Barrington area who have helped and supported her and her children through-

out the years. In thanks, she endeavors to pass these blessings on to others. Her greatest gift is having taught us, by example, that taking care of one another is a sacred trust to be handed down from one generation to the next. And kindergarten rules always apply.

Fred Nelson

I met Margo last year at the Emmaus House community dinner and food pantry. Margo was the first person to greet me, give me a tour, and explain everything. She then introduced me to some of the people to be served (she knows them better than anyone). She put me to work right away. Margo and I became friends from the very beginning. Margo is “Mother Teresa” in our midst. She serves the poor and homeless. She has the biggest heart. As a mother of 12 children, she is full of life! It is a privilege to know this person. I want to grow up to be Margo. If you want to find happiness, peace, joy, the good life, a giving spirit, and significance in the second half of your life – and all with humility – follow Margo around for a few days and learn her secrets.

Tom Pospiech

I have had the pleasure of knowing Margo for more than 14 years. Her outgoing personality and love for children brought us together through my son. One Saturday morning, while my son and I were watering plants and helping to prepare the worship space at St. Francis de Sales, Margo and several mothers along with their children were creating decorations for the Children’s Liturgy at the 11:00 mass. Margo invited my son to help draw and color some pictures, and he eagerly joined them. It is her love for all children that carries over into everything that she does. She also is a voice for those who are struggling through life. Just watch her at the Sunday night community dinner move from table to table talking to strangers, welcoming them, and listening to their stories. Then you turn and find her sitting and coloring with the children, or talking me into giving guitar lessons to some young boys. One of Margo’s sayings that I always take with me is, “less is more.” When I find myself thinking, “If I only had ...”, I think of Margo and keep it simple.


Eileen SanFilippo

I met Margo when we moved to Barrington in 1984. She babysat for my two daughters over a period of years. We’ve been in contact over the years through two of her daughters. I believe what makes Margo so special is her amazing energy. She’s a tiny woman with a huge heart, and she has lots of love and compassion for others in need. But she’s no pushover, either. She’s one of the most honest people I’ve ever known and isn’t afraid to tell you what she thinks. She isn’t afraid of a challenge, and emergency situations don’t faze her. I remember getting a call from her when she had to take my daughter to the emergency room because my daughter had put a toy up her nose. No alarm, just the facts. She also is the best potty trainer I’ve ever met!

Rita Wojnowski

I met Margo 15 years ago at St. Francis de Sales Church. She was a smiling face who proved a warm welcome to my family. Margo always introduces herself by her first name. She is real, and there are no pretenses. Margo and I participated in the same ministry in the church, which involved children and

families. I think what she taught me is that we need to be open and that rules are only guidelines that can be changed and reevaluated. We need to listen to each other, children and adults alike.

Margo’s compassion and love for all cultures is beyond comprehension. The amount of volunteerism she participates in to make others feel that they are loved and wanted is incredible. I do not know where she gets her energy, but she never stops helping others. She takes great pride in her work with Hispanic families in the parish as well as those who are needy or lonesome. Her wisdom and experiences help you see why she is so special. Margo has been a mentor and teacher, but most of all, a friend to both my family and me. I am so fortunate to be able to call Margo my friend. 

Emmaus House of Hospitality Addressing Hunger and Homelessness

— BY BOB GORMAN —

MANY ARE SURPRISED THAT local people are challenged by getting enough nutritious food and paying rents and mortgages. Emmaus House of Hospitality (pronounced “a-MAY-us”) is a nonprofit organization in Lake Zurich. The organization was founded in 1999 by parishioners of St. Francis de Sales, and they work to feed the area’s hungry and prevent homelessness. The Homelessness Prevention Program was started last year and has helped keep 14 families in their homes. Emmaus House works with St. Vincent de Paul Society case workers and Ela Township Social Worker Susan Kostner.

Emmaus House fights hunger. Volunteers pick up food every day from retailers such as Trader Joe’s, Jewel, Pizza Hut, Dominick’s, and Old World Bakery. This food is perfectly good, but it’s usually near its expiration date and cannot be sold. Partnering with volunteers from St. Vincent de Paul Society, the organization picks up this food and distributes it every Thursday and Sunday night in its food pantry. Also supporting these dinners are Mexico Lindo restaurant, Chipotle’s restaurant, Northwest Community Church, Grace Community Church, members of the Strong Men for Christ, the Lions Club, Issac Fox PTO, scouting organizations, volunteers from Lake Zurich and Carmel High Schools, and St. Vincent de Paul Society.

Emmaus House works to feed the hungry in another way. About 300 St. Francis de Sales parishioners prepare homestyle meals for the Emmaus House Sunday Night Community Dinner. Every Sunday, about 150 people gather in Valer Hall to eat a hot, healthy meal together – everyone is welcome. Many qualifying families also are able to bring home diapers and other baby-care items sponsored by a generous grant from Ela Township.

For more information about Emmaus House, visit www.emmaus-house.org or call Bob Gorman at 847-304-9425.

Publisher’s Note: *Quintessential People™* is a heartfelt collaboration between our publication and portrait artist Thomas Balsamo. Our goal is to share with you exceptional images and words that ring true about some of the finest, most inspiring people in the community. For more information about *Quintessential People™*, contact QB at www.QBarrington.com or Thomas Balsamo (Portraits by Thomas) at 847-381-7710 or www.portraitsbythomas.com.