

The Chelsea Standard

Tolerance, diversity and independent thought

Chelsea's Lois DeLeon looks back at successful career

By Sheila Pursglove
, Special Writer

Chelsea resident Lois DeLeon has marched to her own drummer for over seven decades.

DeLeon, whose mantra is "carpe diem - seize the day," has enjoyed a life of arts, music, culture, and social work, never afraid to make new decisions and face new and sometimes difficult challenges.

After a quiet, traditional upbringing in Bad Axe, DeLeon expanded her horizons when she attended Antioch College, a liberal arts college in Ohio, earning a bachelor's degree in art in 1954.

"When I went to Antioch, I found a whole new world out there," she says. "I really found the world was much more exciting than I realized.

"I found an appreciation for tolerance, diversity, and independent thought. When I think back over my life, these are recurring themes."

She headed to the Big Apple for a job designing woven textiles - and since she knew nothing about the manufacturing of textiles, she then spent three years in the city of Leeds in the north of England, heart of the English textile trade.

She also was able to indulge her passion for music, since Leeds hosted world class orchestras from all over Europe.

Returning stateside with a master's degree in Textiles, she turned down a job at the Smithsonian and spent five years as assistant curator of textiles at the Cleveland Museum of Art.

"I really got into the culture scene in Cleveland," she says.

Deciding that textiles were interesting but not very relevant to the world, she switched gears and earned a master's degree in social work at Case Western Reserve in Cleveland. Her first job was working with "unwed mothers" in an era when there was a stigma attached.

"That's when I became very jaundiced with the adoption process and realized

how bad the system was," she says.

When Case Western added a mandatory psychiatry program to their medical student third year program, DeLeon was part of the team tapped to create it.

"It was a whole lot of fun," she says.

At the age of 50 she married an associate professor of psychiatry at Case Western, 10 years her senior.

"We did things backward," she says. "Bought our house in '82, got a yellow Labrador, Mead, in '83 and married in '84. One day, we looked at each other and said, 'We've got to legitimize this dog.' Our parents were there, Mead was there. We were married in the living room. Mead drank the wine and the rest of us went out and had dinner.

"It was unique. I suppose I marched to my own drummer without meaning to. My family was conventional - middle class lives. In some ways, I don't accept things."

When her husband Charlie was diagnosed with dementia, DeLeon worried about facing the world alone. His death generated her need to look to her future, and a huge city didn't seem a good place to grow old.

She decided to move to Chelsea, the home of her brother and sister-in-law, Don and Charlotte Wyche; another brother lives in Ontario, and her sister lives in Chicago so Washtenaw County is a good central meeting place for the family.

Since arriving here, DeLeon has thrown herself wholeheartedly into the local community.

"When I moved here, I was really going to focus on Chelsea," she says. "At one point, I wasn't going to be as mobile as I am now. I knew I was going to focus on Chelsea and all it has to offer.

"I really feel comfortable. I feel like I've made friends. You reach out and people respond. Chelsea is like that. People are very committed to it."

She enjoys visiting art galleries and shopping locally, making new friends around town.

"When you reach out, it's easy to join a new community," she says. "I've just met wonderful people. I've found that everywhere I've gone in Chelsea."

Although leaving Cleveland was hard - she left behind friends, music, art and the symphony - DeLeon says she's happy with her choice.

"I've gained peace of mind and I'm comfortable of where I am in my life," she says. "Silver Maples turned out to be a really good choice. It's a welcoming

group. Again, if you reach out, everyone responds."

Her philosophy is to always keep an open mind when traveling along life's road.

"Don't pre-judge, don't rule things out. You don't know what life brings," she says.

"You can't sit around and be passive. You have to decide what you want to do, and do it."

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