

Expats to repats: From Hamburg to Disney to back home again

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In 2007, after retiring from a management job at Walt Disney World in Florida, MaryAnn DuKane returned to Western New York to care for two elderly aunts.

She grew up in the 1940s and '50s in a large white house on the corner of Camp and Lake Shore roads in Athol Springs, Hamburg. After marrying Adam Domanski, they moved directly across the street, remaining within sight of her parents. She spent forty-plus years living on that corner.

After following their son Doug to Florida in the mid-'80s, DuKane was hired at “the happiest place on earth”: the Disney Vacation Club. Each manager was directed to choose a mascot, and DuKane selected the Fairy Godmother.

“She could make everything better by waving her magic wand,” DuKane said. “That was a skill I wanted to have.”

Name: MaryAnn DuKane

Age: 70s

Current location: Orchard Park

Previous locations: Athol Springs, Hamburg; Orlando

Loves most about Buffalo: Generous people, cultural amenities

Misses most about Orlando: Job and co-workers at Disney

She continued working after her husband died. But when her son and his family relocated to Denver, she knew it was time to return to Western New York, where her roots stretched deep into the community.

“Although I made great new friends in Orlando, I had lifelong friends waiting for me in my hometown,” DuKane said.

Her mother, Clara Milas, was a second-generation Buffalonian who had owned a bridal shop on Fillmore Avenue.

“My mother clothed many hundreds of brides over a span of forty years,” DuKane said. “She did prom and first communion dresses, but people today still stop me and tell me they got their bridal dress at my mom’s store.”

It was more than family history that lured her back, however.

“All you have to do is observe strangers banding together to help a motorist or elderly neighbor dig out of an infamous blizzard to know this is the City of Good Neighbors,” she said. “People come to the curb with coffee or hot chocolate for snow plow drivers.”

DuKane is pleased by her hometown's cultural growth and the variety of activities available for all ages: little leagues, senior services, orchestras, not to mention the diversity of churches and synagogues. She is impressed by the architecture and the continuing development of the medical corridor.

The only negative, she concedes, is when bad weather strikes.

“I don’t like the shoveling,” she admitted. “I sometimes think if someone pulled up with a U-Haul during a snowstorm, I’d get in the truck if they were headed south.”

DuKane has no remaining family in the area — her elderly aunts have since died — but she has resumed a comfortable life, working part time as a visitation consultant at Lakeside Memorial Funeral Home.

The owner, Charles Castiglia, has known DuKane for years. His parents bought her family’s iconic home and converted it to a funeral parlor.

About three years ago, he offered her a part-time job, believing she possessed the perfect temperament to serve as a greeter. DuKane now works in the house where she grew up, assisting with wakes.

“It’s easy to make others feel comfortable there, even under difficult circumstances,” she said. “Pardon the pun, but I feel right at home in this position.”

DuKane is confident that her late parents would be pleased to know their home is now used in service of others.

People ask her about the transition and contrast between jobs. Disney presents a sunny, happy image, while funerals are somber events. But DuKane believes the same skill set is required for each.

“Guest service is a treasured commodity in any caring and successful business,” she said. “No one looks forward to attending a wake. I welcome guests at Lakeside as if they were coming to visit me at home, except it really is my former home. Hopefully, that makes a difference.”