

## The Flynn/Smyk House and Stratham Unity Club History

Those of us lucky enough to have been around for the many Stratham Unity Club coffees and Christmas Tea open house events hosted by Marilyn Flynn in the 1970s and 1980s have many fond memories. The Unity Club was a Stratham women's community service organization with a venerable history—an important part of women's history in the town. Women of all ages (early 20s through 80s and 90s) and backgrounds came together for monthly meetings in the old Town Hall to share fellowship and engage in a wide variety of fund-raisers and service projects. Members also took turns hosting informal monthly coffees in their homes.

Soon after the Flynns had settled into their new home, Marilyn offered to host one of the Unity Club monthly coffee meetings. In its prominent location, the colonial-inspired, large contemporary home had drawn considerable attention throughout the construction and landscaping progress, including a feature article in *New Hampshire Profiles* magazine. Marilyn's coffee drew a big crowd, as members brought friends and family members, all anxious for the chance to see the grand new house. I believe the club gained some new members as a result.

Marilyn was a warm and gracious host. I remember her being especially welcoming to those of us younger members with infants and toddlers in tow. She expressed great delight in having babies and young children exploring the new house, and sampling the refreshments. She could not have made us feel more welcome. The Flynn's five children were all in school at that time, but the house was designed for family living and for hosting large gatherings.

As she showed her guests around the new home, Marilyn expressed pride in the workmanship of the local architect, trades and craftspeople who had helped her and her husband John make their dream house a reality. Never boastful, she relished everything that went into decorating and furnishing the new home and loved sharing her joy with friends and neighbors.

Pleased with the response to the coffee gathering at her new home, Marilyn offered to host the Unity Club's annual Christmas Tea. Every room was beautifully decorated for the Christmas holidays, and Marilyn's generous hospitality and welcoming personality made that year's Christmas Tea a huge event. It became the first of many Christmas Teas that Marilyn would host for the Unity Club. The annual tea was always advertised and open to the public, with donations collected to purchase holiday gifts for residents at the Rockingham County Nursing Home. The teas at the Flynn home drew so many people that the women were able to provide gifts for more nursing home residents.

A hallmark of the Unity Club was its intergenerational fellowship and mentoring. Marilyn Flynn and the Flynn house played key roles in supporting and extending those benefits through two decades. Community services and funding were provided to organizations and people of all generations, including scholarships and

helping to pay for Memorial School fifth-graders to attend the Sargent Environmental Camp. A major project 1979-1981 was publication of the Stratham Unity Club Cookbook. The bright yellow, spiral-bound collection of recipes is a treasure trove of history of Stratham women and families over generations. The funds raised from sales of the cookbook paid for the first computer at Stratham Memorial School. The club purchased an early Apple Mac computer and wheeled cart so it could be moved from classroom to classroom.

The Unity Club was organized in 1920 as an outgrowth of a Red Cross group that did sewing to support the troops in World War I. Social and economic changes often have upsides and downsides. Nearing the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, changes in economic demands and opportunities for women, in jobs and commuting patterns, and more, resulted in declining numbers of women available for volunteer activities during daytime working hours. The Unity Club was dissolved in the late 1980s. But it helped weave together the fabric of community for much of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Stratham, supporting community service and leadership development for women of all ages.

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