

THE TWO RIVER TIMES™

SCENE

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Nina Riccio: A Friend to Families in Need

NINA RICCIO has an enduring image from her childhood in her mind. It is of her mother lugging heavy shopping bags filled with handbags, belts or other items to sell for the benefit of Deborah Hospital.

“My mom was a volunteer,” Riccio said. “She sold things at work for the hospital and sent the money to Deborah. I’ll never forget that. She would walk to the bus with shopping bags filled with umbrellas or whatever she was selling for the week or the month and the money went back to Deborah.

“I saw my mom as a volunteer and my dad always willing to help others,” she said. “They were role models for me.”

It was those type of lessons, learned always by example, from her hardworking mother and father that became the foundation of her own long history of community service.

Riccio will be honored Saturday, Oct. 25, at the Navesink Country Club during the Blue Danube Gala fundraiser for the Family & Children’s Service of Monmouth County (FCS) along with Monmouth Park Charity Fund and Brookdale Community College.

Riccio is being honored for her many years of service to the agency and for obtaining one of the largest donations FCS has ever received.

Family & Children’s Service, which is located in Long Branch and is 105 years old, has the mission to provide “compassionate care, intervention and education to support people during challenging times in their lives.” The organization provides a myriad of services, including adult protective services for the elderly to protect them from various types of elder abuse in both Monmouth and Middlesex counties; insurance counseling, including for those who are trying to work their way through the Affordable Care Act; and caregiver services to assist those who may become overwhelmed while caring for someone. FCS is also a home-care agency that can provide certified home health aides and has a Representative Payee program that helps manage finances for those who are having difficulties doing so because of issues or impairment. The organization runs a very successful thrift shop and has a variety of volunteer programs that send people out into the community.

Riccio spent 22 years as a FCS board member and “rotated off” the board just last year. She left after Super Storm Sandy destroyed her home, to help care for her parents and to give others the opportunity to serve.

The former board secretary, who also raised funds as the development committee chair, still gives her time and energy to the organization, however, now as a “community member” on a committee that helps nominate people for the board and ensures “that the board runs smoothly.”

Ironically, when Riccio first volunteered with FCS more than two decades ago, her first job was getting the RSVPs for the gala sent to her home. She then volunteered to help more with the galas and was chairwoman for six of them over the years.

Riccio became involved with Family & Children’s Service of Monmouth County (FCS) because she “always liked to do things. I never liked just sitting around. My friend was involved and she called me. She said she was going to be the president of the (FCS) board and she thought it was something I’d like to do.”

Riccio initially told her no. She had just finished her involvement with the Monmouth Teen Center and was disheartened that that agency had folded. While she didn’t feel she wanted to take on another challenge, she accepted an invitation to “see what we’re all about at FCS.” She attended development meetings and “just got interested.”

She found herself intrigued by “the people” involved in the agency, their mission and “what they were all about.” The more than a century-old organization, its volunteers, employees and clients captured her attention – and her heart.

One of the first things she wanted to be involved in was Operation Sleighbells, FCS’s signature project, begun in 1909, that puts the gifts of warm clothes, toys and books into the hands of 1,200 Monmouth County children who might otherwise have a tough holiday season. The program’s aim and its recipients touched her and she knew she wanted to help.

Riccio also knew that Operation Sleighbells was something she wanted her daughters to help with and understand. The Riccio family adopted a family and gave to that same family “for many years, until they moved out of the area.

“The best part of the whole thing was that my kids could see what other people didn’t have and that’s what I wanted,” she said. “You know, you live in Little Silver and this one has that and that one has that and I wanted them to see what other people didn’t have. That was important to me.”

The program is one of many that FCS sponsors of which she is proud. She also feels that the agency is the best kept secret in Monmouth County” and that many people could benefit from its programs if they knew more about it.

One of the programs she had a hand in developing is the FCS Corporate Advisory Council, a group that has evolved into the agency unit that runs its fundraising golf outing each year.

Riccio has not only been a board member but she has also used FCS programs. She has retained the services of a home health aide for family members and has sought help from the insurance program to investigate a medication program for her parents and fill out the complicated paperwork.

“There’s so much they can help you with that people don’t understand,” Riccio said. “They can help you with the Affordable Care Act, with Medicare ... I don’t know how some people can fill

out these forms ... They will help you with that.”

While 22 years on a organization’s board is a long time by anyone’s measure, Riccio said “I loved it. I never felt like it was a burden. I met a lot a wonderful people, very hard-working board members and the staff ... some of those people who work there, they aren’t 9-to-5-ers. They don’t leave until their job is done. I’ve seen that firsthand. They are very dedicated. You can’t work there without being very dedicated.”

While the focus of FCS has changed and evolved over its long history, Riccio said, “It has always been to help people... I’m very proud to be a part of the board and the work it has done.

“It didn’t feel like 22 years, it really didn’t,” she said.

She loved running the fundraising galas because “it was like doing a wedding and I had done two of them ... and I loved that we were able to make money for the agency. It was very self-gratifying and fulfilling.

“I wanted to do something for the community. I always was involved with Girls Scouts, the PTA, with Red Bank Catholic (where her daughters attended), Little Silver Rec ... (FCS) was broader and involved a lot more people and was very important.”

Riccio grew up on Virginia Avenue in Jersey City with her two brothers and her parents. Her dad was a barber and her mother worked at the Block Drug’s after her children were no longer little. Her home was just four doors down from where her future husband, Ron, lived.

“We were neighbors,” she said. “We went to the same high school (St. Michael’s in Union City) and we wound up dating and eventually got married ... Our parents were friends so we met early. I think he was 7 and I was 5.”

The Riccios, who have been married 44 years, moved to the Little Silver after having come to the “shore area” for summer vacations.

Riccio said her husband “always said, ‘Some day I’d like to get a house down here.’ So he had friends who lived in this area and they said, ‘Why don’t you look in the Middletown-Red Bank-Little Silver area.’”

The railroad stations in those towns made them attractive for Ron Riccio to commute to Newark where he was a professor, and later, dean of the Seton Hall University Law School.

The couple began looking in Little Silver and in particular on the street they have live now for more than 40 years. The ranch house, that they bought 42 years ago “in mint condition,” was a victim of Super Storm Sandy two years ago. It was demolished and they are now living in a new home on the same property.

Ron Riccio is still commuting to Newark where he still teaches at the law school. He is also general counsel to the law firm of McElroy, Deutsch, Mulvaney & Carpenter, LLP, which just opened an office in Tinton Falls.

The couple has two daughters, two sons-in-law and five grandchildren who live in Oceanport and Tinton Falls.

“Both my girls work so I try to help them whenever I can,” Riccio said.

She is a constant cheerleader at her grandchildren’s events and an oft-times babysitter when needed.

While Riccio is pleased to be honored during Saturday’s gala, she also had to be talked into it. “I know I’m going to be a wreck on Saturday night,” she said.

Those interested in finding out more about Family & Children’s Service of Monmouth County and the services it can provide may visit the website at www.fcsmonmouth.org.

By Michele J. Kuhn



DANNY SANCHEZ