

Preserving History

Name: Joyce Rives

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Joyce Rives, on the surface, is a typical, unassuming resident of Panna Maria - a small town in South Texas which boasts the title of the first permanent Polish settlement in the United States. However, when we look at what she has accomplished, she exemplifies how one person can be instrumental in keeping Polish tradition and cultural awareness alive.

Her story begins with her great grandfather, Albert Pawelek, a man who lived in lower Silesia in the early 19th century. In 1855 he arrived in the port of Galveston, and made his way to Panna Maria. Having purchased land, he established a farm, and continued his trade of carpentry, as he was a master carpenter in Poland. He is most known for the carving of altars, one of which is still in use in Cestohowa, another small Polish town north of Panna Maria. Albert also delivered mail to towns around Panna Maria. While riding in his wagon, he carved crucifixes, some of which are in the Institute of Texan Cultures, located in downtown San Antonio.

Joyce was born and raised in the same town that her ancestors arrived in over 150 years ago. She attended elementary school in Panna Maria, which was taught by nuns. Upon graduating from Karnes City High School, she attended the University of Texas at Austin. She graduated in 1975 with a degree in business: a huge achievement, since her grandparents, as well as her parents, had only an elementary education. Joyce was the first member of her family to go to college.

Her family, mostly farmers and ranchers, could not afford to help her pay her college tuition. She not only had to work throughout her college career, but also had to cut it short by

taking extra courses so that she could graduate in three years. After college, she worked as a personnel director, got married to her husband Andy, and had four children. Eventually, Joyce wanted to become a teacher, so she went back to college in 1988. She received her teaching license in 1992, and became a high school math teacher for 20 years, retiring in 2013.

Every year, Panna Maria hosts an Annual Homecoming Turkey Dinner in October. Every year, Joyce and her husband volunteer at the dinner, serving up hundreds of plates. The tradition dates back many years. Joyce remembers serving water during the event when she was a child. No one knows when or why it started, but the tradition of the Annual Homecoming Turkey Dinner continues today.

Joyce is a member of many organizations that are dedicated to the preservation of the Polish tradition and culture. Currently, she is president of the Panna Maria Historical Society, as well as an active member of the Heritage Center, the Polish American Congress, and the Father Leopold Moczygemba Foundation, the last of which she has won an award for achievements in the Polish Community.

In 1986, Joyce and Loretta Neistroy (the past president of the Panna Maria Historical Society) wrote a grant to open up a visitors' center in the heart of Panna Maria. At first, it started off small. It then grew into what it is today: an invaluable organization that preserves the history of Panna Maria. Throughout the years, visitors have come to the center to learn more about their genealogy, to take tours of the town and museum, or to just sit and talk in Polish, a language Joyce can speak "enough to get me in trouble", as she puts it. The historical society works closely with other organizations to pass on the history and traditions of our ancestors that arrived in this new world in the 19th century.

Much has changed since Joyce was a child. She broke the cycle of minimal education. After graduating from college, she came back to her hometown, to continue preserving the stories, lives, and buildings of the early settlers. She is the reason why the next generation will never forget the sacrifices of their ancestors.