

Spitz: Calendar Girls for a purpose

By Julia Spitz

Thursday, September 15, 2005

Baring your body, age and autobiography is a true leap of faith.

It's one the "Calendar Girls" from First Parish in Framingham say they're glad they took.

"You're only young once," said Esther Hopkins. "I'm not young and I won't have this chance again."

Not that the lawyer, chemist, Boston University trustee and former Framingham selectman, the first black elected to the town's highest board, needed to add "Ms. March" to her resume.

And not that she wouldn't have agreed to pose if it had been a commercial venture, she said. But with fellow Unitarian Universalist church members, "you feel like they're your family. It's different when a family member asks you to do something."

So she agreed to be photographed sans shirt, playing the organ at her Framingham home.

Her grandchildren were taken aback.

"Grandma, you don't have any clothes on," they said.

"So it seems," I said. "So it seems."

Deciding what to call the calendar ("Celebration") was harder than shooting the pictures, said Hopkins, and "we had a lot of difficulty" choosing what to put in the 150-word biography that accompanies each woman's photo.

Revealing her age was also tough.

"When I was running for selectman, people talked about my age," said Hopkins, who marks her 79th birthday this weekend. "Now everybody in town knows how old I am."

That's the point.

"This is a thumbs-up to older women," said Judy Perry, 71, also known as Ms. February. "I'm glad to have been a part of it."

"Other calendars have featured women in their 50s, maybe 60s, but none to my knowledge do 70s and 80s," said Eve Benda, church member and sales and marketing coordinator for the 2006 calendar. "And the women are so beautiful, so accomplished, so alive and vibrant. These are our neighbors. We're just seeing them in a different way."

"We think we have a very special group of women in our church," said "Ms. January" Pat Greeley, 75. The photos "are supposed to be uplifting, celebrating our interests and our talents."

"Being a church (project), we couldn't have the beautiful, young, sexy women" photographed on the cover, seemingly naked in the pews.

"We were not naked in the church," Greeley noted. The women removed just enough to create that illusion.

Still, it's not an image you see every day.

"For some people, that's jarring. But we hope when they take a closer look, they'll see it's not meant to be disrespectful," said Greeley. "We need a little humor, particularly in these times."

"It's not disrespectful," said Diane Engel, Ms. November and a relative youngster at 69. As a Unitarian Universalist house of worship, "it's more than strictly a religious place. It's a meeting house. It's a moral and ethical place. It's not the same kind of place as a cathedral or a chapel."

"Certainly Unitarian Universalism appreciates the spiritual quest of each individual," said the Rev. Stephanie Nichols, pastor.



Faith Waters, 77, is a former member of the Millwood Hunt. (Contributed photo)

"I think the calendar is beautiful," she said, and the depiction of the women "gives me something to aspire to."

And there was a bit of divine inspiration involved in its creation.

Intern pastor Frieda Gillespie and Mary McCarty, a massage therapist, longtime First Parish member and Ms. October, were having lunch in May when Gillespie showed McCarty a similar calendar from an Episcopal church in Narragansett, R.I.

"I just thought, we could do this," said McCarty, who took on the role of project coordinator. "Older women, they get very little press. This was a great way of celebrating older women."

Fellow church member **Lynne Damianos**, a noted architecture and business photographer, agreed to take the pictures.

As someone who usually shoots "buildings, and people with their clothes on, I was a little nervous about this project at first. These women are important women in the community."

But once she decided to do it, "we really did this lickety-split.

"We agreed to do this on a Friday night" at the end of June, said **Damianos**. Because of impending hip replacement surgery, "Faith Waters asked, 'Can you shoot me on (the following) Tuesday?'"

"We finished all the photography in a month" and went to press at the beginning of August. Shooting digital helped speed the project and allay any worries for the calendar girls.

"I would show them the pictures I took so they could feel comfortable" with the images, she said.

And the images are incredible. Even those of us 30 years younger could envy the women's skin tone.

So what's the secret?

Being active, said the women.

The photographs "were not retouched at all," said **Damianos**, except for Waters' image being added in the pews on the cover, since she was in the hospital at the time. "We are celebrating these women for who they are. I didn't think (softening lines) was appropriate."

Someone asked Greeley, "Did you get out the iron to get rid of the wrinkles?"

"I should have clobbered him," joked Ms. January.

So how do their families feel about all this exposure?

Greeley's husband is "thrilled. He's very proud, and he's quite a conservative person in many ways." Her grandsons "think it's a hoot, but I'm not sure all teenagers would."

When "Ms. December" Martha Gaby's 18-year-old granddaughter got wind of the project, she "told my daughter, 'That's gross.'"

But Gaby's husband is pleased with the outcome, she said.

"He thinks I'm pretty."

"I asked my husband what he thought" before agreeing to be May's pinup, said Faith Waters. "It seemed like the fair thing to do. He said, 'You're old enough to make your own decisions.' After 57 years of marriage, he's getting used to me by now."

As for the end result, the calendar "strikes him as comic, and it does me too," said Waters.

"We're hoping we'll have all kinds of an audience" for the calendar, said McCarty. "I've sold a copy to the hospice nurse I work with. Her mother cried (when she saw it). Her teenaged sons thought it was a hoot. They said, 'These women have (nerve).'"

"It appeals to old people," said "Ms. May" Waters. "It appeals to the friends of May, January, February, that sort of thing."

Younger women see it as inspirational, said marketing manager Benda.

"Quite a few are buying it for their mothers or their Aunt Bessies. But one man said, 'Oh no, it's going to appeal to us older guys,'" said Greeley.

"Men might buy it," Gaby said, but "they'd have to ask their wives before they hang it up.

But it could appeal to anyone, said Gaby, because "they had the sense to make it interesting. Each of the ladies in there is a substantial person in her own right."

"I thought it was a brilliant idea," said Paul Ashton, owner of Annie's Book Stop in Nobscot Shopping Center. "I didn't think I'd actually sell any, though."

But "they're going quicker than I thought," he said yesterday, as he restocked the shelf.

And that's before the calendar's official launch, set for Sunday, Sept. 25, at the church.

"Pre-sales have been great," said Nichols, the pastor.

Two thousand copies of the calendar have been printed. They're \$15, available at the church, Annie's, Barber Bros. in Natick, Russell's Garden Center in Wayland and online, fpfcalendar.org. Proceeds will be used for church operating costs such as heating, maintenance and repairs.

"It's very possible this will go into a second printing," said Greeley. "If that happens, we very possibly could set up a separate fund to help (Hurricane Katrina) victims."

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