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Strutting behind the scenes

While New Year's Day parade may be the highlight for a Mummer, members share a unique lifestyle with family and friends year-round as well.

By Mark Moss

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In relation to the entire world, the United States is essentially an infant. Being more than 200 years old, it's seen its share of war, financial crisis and turmoil, as well as glorious feats of human endeavor. In that course of events, one thing stands true and keeps us grounded: Family and friends.

The Mummers have been around for almost as long as America has been an established country. According to the Mummers Museum, 1100 S. Second St., George Washington marched as a Mummer as did John Adams. Legend has it, Thomas Jefferson was also a Mummer prior to becoming president. Some Mummer clubs, like in the Fancy Brigade division are the moral center of their respective communities.

As each year comes to an end, another begins, and with it, comes the preparation for the next year's parade. Each Fancy Brigade club has a business committee to handle the organization while the club captain manages the details for the upcoming parade. There also are smaller committees that deal with themes, floats and costumes.

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Most children wake up on Sunday morning, eat a hearty breakfast and prepare for a day full of football and Sunday dinners with the grandparents. The child of a Mummers has been raised slightly differently. Sundays were the most important drill day of the week and parents made sure you were ready and dressed appropriately for the outdoor practice. Your grandfather would get in the car, and you would immediately jump on his lap.

While our parents taught us important life lessons and how to make it in life, our grandfather always taught you the importance of being a Mummer — the rules, so to speak. In order to keep a straight line, address to the front and to the right. If the person in front of you is wrong, they are still right. If you drop something, don't pick it up. If you lose your place, improvise and if all else fails, keep just going. These are things that only make sense to a Mummer.

We soon realize that we are surrounded by family and friends and join specific committees with the same people we've come to know and ones that address our strengths. We get involved in community work outside of the club by attending fundraisers for families of veterans and the needy; volunteering at phone banks at the local PBS station and shoe drives; and gathering coats for the poor. Being a Mummer is so much more than Golden Slippers and umbrellas.

As drills wrap on Sunday mornings, everyone heads back to their clubhouses and garages to continue working on costumes, floats and everything else parade related. Grandmothers, mothers and even fathers make sumptuous meals for us as we work diligently on our respective projects. Every one has an important part in building a great Mummers club.

Children look forward to running and playing with our friends' children. In between, we look on proudly as the kids settle down just enough to learn the meticulous art of Mummery. It's a bonding session, a gathering of family and friends, that most other communities would die to be a part. As parents around the country pay good money for their children to learn a craft, we are taught it, instinctively as Mummers, everyday of the year.

Our parents and grandparents have taught us to cherish the friends we make. It's heartwarming to know that the friends we made as young children have evolved into lifelong friendships. Our grade school pals are still our good friends. We work together, enjoy dinner together, are in each others 'weddings and christen each others' children. We even help each other move to a new house and build additions to old ones.

Just as important as our friends, we also are surrounded by family. Entire Mummer organizations were built from the structured blocks of family, from the legacy of Captain Bill Isaacs who built the Downtowners to Billy Dicks of the original Vikings. The long, prestigious lineage started by Bill

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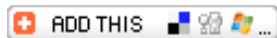
McIntyre continues today in Bill McIntyre's Shooting Stars, along with the more than 20 sets of father, sons and brothers who make up the Jokers NYA to the Clevemore Fancy Brigade that Ralph Tursi founded and to the close-knit fathers, sons, sisters, brothers and friends of the D'Amatos and Passios that founded the South Philly Vikings. These clubs, as well as all the others that make up the Fancy Brigade Division, may differ in make up and structure, but all can claim one thing in common: Family.

As we sit down next to our children, in our cherished clubhouses, having taught them the art of correctly applying hot glue to a sequin, you look down as they, with their tiny fingers, ever so gently, grasp a glue gun. You remember that first time, when your father taught you to do the same. The time he taught you to seek out the perfect mirror to put the sequin in the perfect place on what you believed to be the most perfect costumes is when, you come to see, that what had become a precious tradition for you is now a cherished way of life for your children.

While each club tosses playful jibes at each other and has differing opinions about a favorite sports team or political candidate may cause ongoing and conflicted family discussions, the art of Mummery always will keep us grounded in the realization that no matter what, when in need, we can always rely on each other. We are so much more than Mummies.

Mark Moss is a member of the South Philly Vikings NYB.

Contact the South Philly Review at editor@southphillyreview.com.



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1. **Meredith McEwing said...** on Dec 11, 2012 at 04:58PM



"This is so wonderfully written. I come from a long line of a huge Mummer family, and I know that they would all agree with me. We can all relate to every part of this article. It really hits home for me, I can picture my family going through all of the time honored traditions mentioned in this article. I loved it. Thank you so much!"

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