WE ASKED AND YOU ANSWERED. HERE ARE...

Your favorite neighborhood traditions

HOME SALES Search for the newest listings newsday.com/realestate
A Dickens fest, sunset serenade and local reunion part of LI heritage

BY KRISTIN TAEHERE
Special to Newsday

From festivals to concerts to charitable events, Long Islanders say their hometowns’ long-held traditions make life richer in countless ways.

These are experiences people crave, says Margot Garant, mayor of Port Jefferson Village, where residents turn out in droves to support beloved community traditions such as an annual Charles Dickens Festival each December.

"People want that... we’re kind of starving for that as a culture," says Garant. "It makes them feel they’re connecting with something we’re kind of losing, which is a historical cultural experience they can participate in."

Following are six communities with time-honored traditions Long Islanders love.

SEA CLIFF

In the North Shore village of Sea Cliff, overlooking Hempstead Harbor and the Long Island Sound is a grassy gathering place, officially named Veteran’s Memorial Park, locally known as "Sunset Park," it has long been a favorite spot for residents to come together and enjoy the sky’s long, lazy tradition from daylight to twilight — especially during the summer concerts known as Sunset Serenades.

For one area LI resident, the sunset itself is beside the point. Vinny St. Marten, a local musician who has been blind since childhood, says he has enjoyed the tradition from both sides of the microphone over the years. On a recent warm August night, he performed a Sunset Serenade with his band, Vinny St. Marten & Blind Boy Blues. Though he can’t see the sunset, the concerts are like a treat for his other senses, he says. "Between the smells and the sounds and the people laughing and having a good time — it’s like being at a feast," says St. Marten, 74, who lives in nearby Glen Cove. "Music, people playing, people dancing. It’s really a great place to be."

For sale This Sea Cliff home has four bedrooms and two bathrooms and is listed for $650,000. Annual property taxes are $72,332. Listing agent: Sheila Weng, Daniel Gale Sotheby’s International Realty, 516-759-6622

ON THE COVER Audience members watch as The Blind Boy Blues, above, play the Sunset Serenade in Sea Cliff.

MATTITUCK

Any Long Islanders are familiar with the Mattituck Strawberry Festival, a multiday affair that unofficially kicks off the summer season each June with a celebration of a signature North Fork crop, the strawberry. But while the main event draws thousands of visitors annually with rides, fireworks and fruity treats, a more intimate gathering, known as Hulling Night, brings neighbors together on the eve of the festival to prep the berries and get ready to put their community’s best foot forward. "It’s just a lot of fun," says Vivian Fritz, 16, a junior at Bellport High School. "You don’t do much except hull strawberries, but for some reason we can sit there for hours, and we get bucketloads done, and it’s nice." Fritz says she enjoys the opportunity to unplug and connect in person. "You can’t use your phone while your hands are covered in strawberry juice," she says. "You’re just there for hours doing the same thing."

UNEQUALED

A scorching heat wave in late July didn’t stop friends and neighbors of all ages from reconnecting at a spot that has long served as the heart of the neighborhood: a park with basketball courts, where local youths have been shooting hoops and forging friendships for generations. The former Smith Street Park — recently renamed Bernard Brown Park — was a dedicated mentor of Uniondale youth, now the site of an annual reunion picnic, now in its ninth year, for those who know the unique joys of growing up in this tight-knit, supportive neighborhood. "We all look forward to that third weekend in July," says Larry Moore, 66, a retired corrections officer whose late best friend the park was named for. "Everybody gets together; it’s just beautiful." He says that the camaraderie runs deep. "The way
endure

PORT JEFFERSON
For nearly a quarter century, the Village of Port Jefferson has been transporting holiday visitors back in time for the Charles Dickens Festival — an immersive experience in which one might encounter a roaming Dickensian character while strolling through streets bedecked in Victorian-era holiday splendor. Seasonal music, ice skating, horse and carriage rides and sweet confections set a magical scene.

"It is super fun because everybody's in a happy spirit at Christmas," says resident and performer Nicholas Rodriguez, 10, who made his festival debut as the street character Young Scrooge four years ago. He will play Oliver Twist for the second time this year in an outdoor performance of the musical "Oliver!"

Village Mayor Margot Garanti says that one of the keys to keeping this tradition alive and thriving is a commitment to the performing arts. "We are dedicated to this. There's not a lot of people who really invest in the arts the way that we are investing in the arts. They should be treated as an anchor, and one of the pillars, that makes a community strong."

Buying here In a recent search of MLSL.com, homes for sale in Port Jefferson range from $379,000 for a two-bedroom, 2½-bathroom condo to $3.25 million for a six-bedroom, 3½-bathroom waterfront home.

HUNTINGTON
When the Huntington High School community has something to say, you'll get the message. For more than 50 years, the 12-foot face of a boulder, locally known as The Rock, has served as a sort of low-tech message board that students, and sometimes parents and alumni, paint and decorate to mark an occasion, commemorate an event, make a statement or even a prom proposal.

Irene Messina, 61, a 1975 graduate who has worked as an aide in the district for 15 years, says The Rock has been a part of her family's life for several generations. She recalls painting the school's blue devil mascot on The Rock during her own high school years — as well as starting a new tradition for her daughter's class in 2000. She and other parents were the first to cover the rock with the logos of the graduates' seniors' chosen colleges.

"It's this kind of beautiful, unscheduled, grassroots kind of thing, where people respect each other's messages and they won't go over them for a certain period of time. And we don't govern them," says Huntington High School Principal Brenden Cusack. "To me, that's pretty special."

Buying here In a recent search of MLSL.com, homes for sale in Huntington range from $269,000 for a two-bedroom, one-bathroom Colonial to $3.56 million for a six-bedroom, four-bathroom Colonial.

Frankie Martinez performs in "A Christmas Carol" with other actors at the Charles Dickens Festival in Port Jefferson.