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Kentlands is one of the first, and probably the best known, of the archetypal towns and villages of country and city which are actually built by architects who design, not just buildings, but entire communities and the towns in which they exist. Lakelands is a similar, adjacent, community with a character of its own.

## Feature Series – Part IV

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### “Our” Spouses Part IV – Donna Jean Marraffa

by M. H. Perry

Henry Marraffa was first elected to the Gaithersburg Council in 1995. Donna Jean is originally from Philadelphia and moved here in 1971—moved to Diamond Farms and fell in love with the West Riding neighborhood. In 1979, she met Henry who was born in Washington DC, but was raised for the most part in North Carolina. He had spend every summer with his grandparents in North Carolina from the time he was three years old until he was eighteen. He worked on their farm. He went to the University of Maryland for two years in engineering, and then finished his education at Southeastern University on a basketball scholarship and got a degree in business. He has been an entrepreneur, has owned his own business, and never worked for anyone else. He first had a slot car business. Since fads go in and out, he then started in an asbestos business and had contracts with Disney and the World Trade Center. That was before the hazards of asbestos were known. When they were discovered, that ended the business. He then went into a software business with Computer Aided Drafting. He has retired three times and gone back to work three times.

*Hear  
Donna Jean's  
Words*



*Donna Jean Marraffa*

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Donna Jean is an office manager for an oncologist. She has worked for him for ten years. “I love my job. It’s very intense. Hectic. We see almost a hundred people a day. But I feel like I make a difference. Very sick people come in. We’re always there to help them.

“I remember the first three months that I worked there. I would come home and cry because it was very intense; all these people were so sick. I would say, I

can’t do this. But I thought, no, it’s not going to get the best of me. As my doctor said to me, you have to form a little hard shell so you don’t get so involved personally with the patients’ lives. That’s pretty hard to do when you

see a patient on a daily basis and you see them every day for, say, six weeks, and some of these patients don't have families. You do get involved. They tell you their life stories. And it's nice. I love the people. I love being with them, but I work a four day week, eleven hours a day, and I have Friday off. I don't think I could go the fifth day. On Thursday night, I am really, really drained. But I wouldn't change it for anything. I absolutely love the job. Love the people I work with. I love my job. And I'm still there."

—Interviewer's words are in red.

—Donna Jean Marraffa's words are in blue.

At the time they met, Henry and Donna Jean were each single parents. "They called us the Brady Bunch." They married in 1983 and have lived in their home since then, "...and the rest is history. We have lived happily ever after."

When Donna Jean was growing up, it was all about getting married and having a family, so that is what she did. She would like to have had more children. The five children in the combined family became very good friends with each other. "It was a joy, really. It was just meant to be. It just kind of fell into place. The kids are all just absolutely wonderful, and having the staggered ages was perfect." The children were 8, 9, 12, 15, and 16, so they fit together very well.

**What made Henry become involved in politics?**

Henry was always involved. He had a boys and girls club in Olney. He was president of the PTA. Here he became active in the Citizens Association in West Riding. Seneca Highway was coming through, and Henry got very involved in that. He fought to get a fence separating the fourteen houses in the neighborhood from the highway. As a result, his neighborhood was the only one to have a fence at that time. After that, he called Mayor Ed Bohrer and asked about getting involved in politics. Ed told him that it wasn't easy, but told him to get the packet if he was interested. The first election, he lost but did quite well. Ed encouraged him to continue his interest in the city and appointed him to the Board of Appeals. And that's how it all started.

**What was that like for you?**

The first time he ran was in 1993. All the kids were in college, so it was prime time for him to really get involved. We had taken care of our children, they were all settled and knew what they wanted to do. As far as I was concerned, it was scary for me. I'm not a public person although I love people. I think it takes a certain kind of personality to get out there and take the abuse at times. But Henry loves being in the limelight, and it just seemed like a natural for him.

**Fish in water, huh?**

Fish and water! They just seem to go together. It just worked out perfectly.

**Interesting that it was scary for you at first. What were the things you worried about?**

I really didn't worry because I knew Henry, and I knew that anything he went into, he could handle. I didn't know whether I would like it. But you know what? I got over it, and meeting new people was probably the best thing that ever happened. We made numerous friends. It was different. It was just different being out there. I wasn't used being in front of everybody. And not used to everybody knowing me and knowing what I was about, but Ed Bohrer and his wife just brought us along. Sharon was so easy to get along with; she really mentored me, and I just thought she was a great role model.



**Did the children get involved in Henry's political campaigns?**

The kids were away at school, so they didn't get involved until the last election. Then the four who live around

here got involved. They walked the parade and handed out brochures. They like him in the limelight, but they have no political aspirations themselves.

We have Wednesday night dinners for our children and grandchildren. Henry makes dinner for all of us.

We now have our two youngest children married with children and have bought houses two blocks from us. It's a wonderful arrangement. We love having them here. Not only do we love our kids, but we're CRAZY about our grand kids, you know that. We never have just a little dinner. Everybody is here. It's a lot of fun, and the cousins get to play together which I think is very important.

Each of the two children who live here have two children and they visit their North Carolina daughter and her two children often. Each family has a girl and a boy.

### Have you thought about entering politics?



Never! And would I? Never. Not my cup of tea. It's never interested me. Not that I don't have an opinion. I do always have an opinion, but I'm not thick-skinned enough to do that. And it takes a lot.

You have these valuable Wednesday night dinners with the children and grandchildren, but each member of the city council has that magic little phone. What happens when there is an urgent phone call from the city during your family gatherings?

It just happens. He's on e-mail everyday in touch with the city. The cell phone is always on. He would never not take a call. And we totally understand. We laugh about it at times.... I don't mind. The kids don't mind. He answers the question, comes right back, and we just carry on where we left off. Any time day or night, people can call, and it doesn't bother me at all.

### Flexibility obviously.

You have to be very flexible. Flexible I am. Very flexible. In my job, in my daily duties... we're spur of the moment people. We very seldom have one thing to do in a day. It's always five. But I think that's what makes life interesting. I like attending the political things with him. It's fun, you learn things, you meet people. It's a different world. It brings in a new daylight to you. It's been fun. Even though I hate politics, and I hate elections, but I always, always am there, and I would never not be there for him.

### What is your role when a serious controversial issue comes up?

Sometimes I don't like to get involved because I'm not sure whether it's a confidential issue, but if it's not, he's not afraid to ask what I think, and to tell you the truth, I'm not afraid to offer my opinion whether he wants it or not. I think he needs to hear other voices, and I don't have any problem with telling him what I think, and at times I think he's not listening to me, but he truly does hear me.

If a young married couple came to you because the husband was considering a political career, and it looked like he would be successful, what advice would you give the young wife?

First of all, if a man goes into a political career, he needs the support of his wife, and it's going to make it very tough if you're not there for him, no matter what. You have to be behind your man—totally. There are times that there are a lot of things I don't want to do, but I do them because I know it makes him happy, and I'm there, and I don't mind working. Sometimes, you just have to go with the flow. That's the only way I can put it. At this level of politics, it's nice because it's non partisan. When you make that step up like he did for the County Council, it gets a little tougher.

My advice is just to be very careful, to be a little guarded, and just be very supportive and go with the flow. That's

the easiest thing to do.

**Because of the length of time that your husband has been in public office, there must have been times when people said or printed things about him that were either untrue, unfair, or both. How do you handle your feelings at those times?**



I would say that that has happened more than once, which doesn't make me very happy. I have no bones about saying that it upsets me tremendously because the papers always distort what you say. So I just don't read it anymore. And I very seldom watch him on TV. It's sort of like watching your child play basketball, and you want him to get that ball in, and you're so nervous. I can't stand it when someone attacks him. It just drives me up a wall, and I have a tough time not standing up and shouting. So I figure, play it low key. I'm sure he doesn't want me there. So I just try to play it low key and not say anything. I try not to read it. I just try not to get upset about it. He's so nonchalant about this whole thing. He's a natural because it doesn't bother him. It bothers me, but I think that's because I'm a mother. Just like it would bother you if someone said nasty things about your son. It's just that instinct, you know, that I just don't like all of this. And sometimes I wonder how he can do it. How he knows when he reads the paper that that's not what he said. And he'll get angry about it, and then he'll say, "You know what, it doesn't matter. People know me and know what I stand for." And he just lets it go by.

Some people can do that. I'm not one who can do that, and that's why I'm not in politics.

I often wonder how people can run for the Presidency. How much stress that can be on a person. To take all that stress.

**Your husband was elected to the twenty-five member National League of Cities. Was that quite an honor?**

It's quite an honor, and I'm so, so proud of him. First of all his love of the national League of Cities is just unbelievable. He loves working with all the mayors, with all the different council people, of all the cities. You learn things about other people's cities and bring it back to incorporate it into your city to make it better. It's a great, great league that he was honored with.

He has served on these committees for years and absolutely loves it, and they want him because he's direct, he's honest, he assesses a problem, and he acts on it immediately. He's got good vision.

I just couldn't be more proud.

**What is the best thing about having a family member involved in running the city?**

I think just meeting new people. We have made so many nice friends through the city, people that we would have never met. The council people, their wives. All the wives are awesome. We like to do things with them. We have picnics. We go to the fireworks together. It's quite a comradery. Ann Lynn and I shop. It's fun. It's just been a lot of fun. We enjoy having lunch together. We talk among ourselves, and we all support our husbands. That's one thing we have in common.

**Do you think it's important for Henry to be involved in city work?**

Very important. Henry is one voice, but he is a determined voice, and he has the city at heart. He would never do anything that wasn't right for this city. And he will fight. Whether he runs again or not, that's up to him, but I kind of think the city needs him.

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