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It's Her Home, Literally



Lillian Hertlin, right, chats with Hertlin House director Sharon Hamilton at the 120-unit senior housing unit in Lake Ronkonkoma. Hertlin, 90, has lived for two years at the complex that bears her name.

Lillian Hertlin gave land, and her name, to her new residence.

By Rhoda Amon
Staff Writer

The residents of Hertlin House were having an impromptu songfest. Old favorites such as "O Susannah," "You Are My Sunshine" and "Let Me Call You Sweetheart." One clear soprano rang out above all the others in the group surrounding the piano.

At 90, Lillian Hertlin still has a lusty voice and a joy of living. She

joins in the hymn-singing at her church, United Methodist of Lake Ronkonkoma, and community singing in the piano lounge of the senior apartment complex where she has lived for the past two years. But mostly she just tries to "fit in" with the other 100 or so residents and not be pointed out as "a celebrity."

The 120-unit senior housing complex in Lake Ronkonkoma is called Hertlin House for good reason. Lillian Hertlin donated the land on which the facility was built. About 20 apartments are still available in the complex. (For information, visit www.hertlinhouse.org.)

Seniors are welcome to come for a three-month trial period, said executive director Sharon Hamilton. If they choose not to become permanent residents, "we part friends," she said.

When Hertlin was a child in the 1920s, her father bought 14 acres of Long Island woods near their Lake Ronkonkoma summer home.

To Lillian, an only child, it was paradise, a place where she could play all day, pick berries and wildflowers and listen to the birds' songs.

Ten years ago, still a nature-lover living alone in the big Ronkonkoma house, she made plans to donate the



The Lillian Hertlin Theatre in the Hertlin House offers residents a comfortable setting and a big screen.



The Hertlin House dining room is full of bright colors and sunlight.

Newsday Photos / Karen Wiles Stable

14 acres to Aging in America, a Bronx-based non-profit that then created the Methodist Retirement Community Development Corp. to build a retirement home so she could spend her days in her woods.

It didn't happen overnight. In the works for five years, the complex finally got approval from the Town of Brookhaven in 2001 and began to rise slowly. Hertlin, a retired Sayville High School math teacher, watched the progress from her nearby home. She would sometimes don a hard hat to observe the construction more closely. She wanted to make sure the woods around the building would be preserved.

A fall that broke her hip hastened her decision to move into Hertlin House. She became one of the first residents when the building opened in August, 2003.

It took a long time, but Lillian is persistent," said her friend, Helen Brion of Lindenhurst, who was a guest at a party honoring Hertlin on the second anniversary of the opening. Hertlin found the reception "overwhelming."

Brion, a fellow member of the Western Suffolk Alpha Delta chapter of Delta Kappa Gamma Society of women educators, frequently visited Hertlin in her big Victorian house filled with family heirlooms. "She loved to entertain. She's a very generous person."

The two also traveled together with other members of the society in the '90s.

"Four of us went to Alaska, and five of us flew to England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales," Brion, a retired Farmingdale teacher, said. "I'm the young kid, only 82."

Fortunately for Hertlin, who loves company, "there's a great camaraderie in Hertlin House," Brion said.

Hertlin, always ready for a party, presides each night at her favorite dinner table, with Josephine, Florence, Mary, Peggy, Joyce and sometimes Jim. She eats what she pleases from the menu, favoring seafood and roast chicken and not worrying anymore about her diet, said her friend, Barbara Colucci of Stony Brook.

She does care about her appearance, however. "She's always in fashion, a real lady," Brion said.

Not an early riser, Hertlin has a continental breakfast at 10 in the Cafe. Some mornings she'll visit the fitness center and "ride the bicycles," Hamilton said.

Hertlin said she sometimes attends a crafts class. "It depends on what's available."

Hertlin pays the same as other residents for her one-bedroom apartment with den, including all meals and transportation.

Still the outdoors woman, she walks on the surrounding paths, although not as far she used to, Hamilton said.

Most days Hertlin watches the bird feeders planted around the building.

"I watch for the morning doves," she said. "Then the finches come at mid-morning."

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