

There's A 'Mom Away From Home' At 4-H Horse Show

UNIVERSITY PARK (Centre Co.) — Only a handful of celebrities are recognized by a single name — Cher, Liza, Madonna, Elvis, and Liberace, to name a few. The Pennsylvania State 4-H Horse Show has its own single-name star — Maria!

Maria Campomizzi is the headliner in the show's Hospitality Room every October, and her fans return year after year to pay homage. Mention her name, and almost anyone who's ever worked the show will use any or all of the following words to describe her: friend, encourager, coach, excellent cook, superb hostess, hard worker, untiring volunteer, unique and loveable person.

At the 1982 state show, the late Jim Gallagher (another name instantly recognized among Pennsylvania horse lovers) expressed his concern to Maria that many of the show judges and committee members had not found time to eat properly. Jam-packed days and the lack of nearby restaurants had not permitted them to break free long enough to have a decent meal.

Maria took it upon herself to telephone a long list of Harrisburg cateries and convinced one of them to stay open past regular hours for the hungry horse-show people. Gallagher was so impressed with her ingenuity and take-charge attitude that he invited her to initiate a "hospitality room" at the 1983 show.

Maria brought plenty of homemade vegetable soup, hot coffee, bagels, and doughnuts that first year, but decided she would have to find a way to top her own efforts the next year, and the next, and the

next. The hospitality room soon became an oasis for twenty-five or so horse show staffers — a place to get away from the noise, the crowds, the dust. Maria is there for five days every year, from early morning until late at night, serving breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and snacks in between. She doses out generous measures of friendship along the way.

"It's really like having your own 'Mom-away-from-home'," said Don Tanner of McKean County Cooperative Extension. "And if you're too busy to leave your post, she'll bring the food to you or relieve you while you break away to eat."

Tanner, as well as many others, said Maria simply has always been there, and it would be hard to imagine the state show without her.

Like all great stars, Maria begins preparing for her one-woman show long before the performance. As soon as this year's busy show week is over, she will begin poring over supermarket ads for the best foods, then spend the winter cooking and baking all the sumptuous goodies people will enjoy next fall. She will spend the spring and summer stocking her freezer with fresh fruits and vegetables from her own garden and those of others. All of this is simply a labor of love for Maria, who considers herself a "frustrated gourmet cook."

So much can be said about this small, generous, energetic woman who came to the United States by way of Germany, with brief stopovers in World War II labor and refugee camps. Over the years, Maria has shared a wealth of

inspiring stories with friends and co-workers. She said that 4-H people have become her family here in America. Her work at the State 4-H Horse Show is simply a culmination of decades of volunteerism with 4-H, including 23 years as a 4-H horse leader in Bucks County.

Maria has worked the regional 4-H horse shows as host, judging-team coach, and horse-bowl judge, and she has represented her county at district meetings. But 4-H is a passion with Maria. Her fan club said she loves the kids and will do anything for them, including chauffeuring them to clinics and various other activities.

Montgomery County Cooperative Extension Agent Nancy Kadwill said Maria has been known to travel hundreds of miles to take young people (too young to be eligible) to 4-H State Days to practice horse judging for future competition.

In addition, she teaches a measuring certification class for county 4-H leaders and gives horse clinics for 4-H'ers in Bucks County. When Maria judges horse shows across the state, she generously donates her fees to the Therapeutic Riding Endowment Fund in support of the 4-H Horseback Riding for the Handicapped program.

In 1992, Maria helped establish the James Gallagher Trophy in Grooming and Showmanship at the regional level. She said that much of her work now is a tribute to Gallagher, who was Penn State's equine specialist for many years. Gallagher conducted the first interstate 4-H horse judging contest in the United States, which became the National 4-H Horse



Maria Campomizzi is the headliner at the State 4-H Horse Show's Hospitality Room every October. Her cooking and friendship make long days at the Pennsylvania Farm Show Complex more palatable for the show judges and committee members.

Judging Contest, and he worked with the Easter Seal Society to organize handicapped-riding programs in Pennsylvania.

At the time of his death in 1991, he was planning a Pennsylvania Center for Integrated Therapy and conducting an economic impact study of the equine industry in the state. Many of those Maria so willingly serves correspond with her throughout the year with letters, Christmas cards, and thank-you notes.

Although she is concerned that her age will soon limit her work, Maria said she will be at the State 4-H Horse Show again this year, dishing out food and friendship.

This year's State 4-H Horse Show will be held October 28-30 at the Farm Show Complex in Harrisburg. For more information, contact Extension Horse Program Coordinator Pat Comerford (814) 863-3657 or Kathy Houser (814) 863-3668.

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