

# LIVING Local

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# GRAND Groundskeeper



BY MARIE HAVENGA

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When Grand Haven resident Mary Stancik plants flowers, millions of visitors bask in the blooms.

But in the grand scheme of things, Stancik doesn't do much digging in her Sheldon Street yard. The 22,000 tulip bulbs she buries each spring wouldn't fit there.

Stancik works on higher ground — at the Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island.

Stancik, who graduated from Michigan State University with a degree in turf management, has worked as head groundskeeper for the Grand Hotel since 2005.

On a recent sun-spangled afternoon, Stancik stood on the 660-foot-long front porch of the historic hotel, surrounded by thousands of potted red geraniums, and gazed at the landscaping below. In the distance, ferry boats cascaded through the sparkling Straights of Mackinac, their wakes methodically lapping toward the shore. The mighty Mackinac Bridge stood silhouetted against a robin's egg-color sky.

"This is my workplace," said Stancik, sweeping her arm across the unfolding scene. "You can't be stressed out looking at this every day."

She's surrounded by more than 60,000 flowers, all hand planted by her garden crew of nine.

"Every year we do something different," said Stancik, 49.

Stancik grew up in the Benton Harbor/St. Joseph area. She moved to Grand Haven in 1992 and maintained the Kent Country Club at Plainfield Avenue and Knapp Street in Grand Rapids before joining the Grand Hotel staff, where she oversees the golf course and 100-acre grounds.

"We try to do real bright, real cheerful splotches of color to draw the eyes to the hotel," Stancik said. "I love the bright combinations and I like to hear people's reactions. We hear a lot of positive comments about the grounds, which makes us feel good."

Stancik lives in an island apartment from April through late October. She does most of her grocery shopping at Doud's, a tiny old-style store on the main tourist strip. On occasion, she'll journey back to the mainland and drive to Gaylord for some serious shopping.

Stancik said she loves the slow-paced life on the island, and said returning to Grand Haven in November can be a culture adjustment.

"Once I'm home, it takes me a couple of weeks to get used to it," she said. "It's so quiet here at night and at home. ... I have to get used to getting in my car and going to Meijer. It's an adjustment driving again."

While in Grand Haven, the gardening guru talks to growers on the telephone and orders plants for next year's floral fiesta. She'll sit down with the head gardener next month to launch garden bed designs.

All the soil that will be used in planters next year is being created now — through a compost of coffee grounds from the Grand Hotel kitchen and plant debris. The self-sustaining eco process provides 8-10 yards of fertile stock every spring, according to Stancik.

As Stancik walks through the hotel and about the grounds, she is greeted warmly by fellow staff members who have become like family, she said.

But despite the close-knit island resort community, Stancik said she often finds her mind wandering to another resort town — her hometown of Grand Haven.

"I miss the beach," said Stancik, who made it back to the Tri-Cities only twice this summer. "I was quite a beach person. And I miss Pronto Pups and the Coffee Grounds. Those are my hangouts."

"I keep in touch with my friends there," she continued. "They talk about walking the boardwalk and all the local events. I get homesick sometimes. The last couple of years, I haven't been able to make it home for Coast Guard."

Stancik lives on "island time" — a rhythmic pace marked by the gentle beat of clopping horse hooves, a sunrise to the east and day's end painted in crimson on the other side.

By November, shadows will fall early on the rolling hotel grounds. Tourists will have long since departed and Stancik will return home. She'll relax this winter in Coast Guard City, sip coffee and reunite with friends.

But when the season's first buds appear, her mind will wander to a woodchip path on an island far away, where native plants await the first breath of spring.

"Come about the beginning of March, I get real antsy to get back up here," Stancik said from Mackinac Island. "When things start to grow in Grand Haven, that's when I get the itch to come back here. It's just a different atmosphere. It's a simple way of life. It's not for everyone, but I personally love it."



Mary Stancik



Photos by Marie Havenga

