

Stepping Up:

After 80 years, Lucy Erickson still at home in Park Ridge schools

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Lucy Erickson was just 7 years old when she took her very first "job" in a Park Ridge school.

It was the early 1930s and Lucy's father, William Fisher, was the very first custodian at Roosevelt School, which opened in 1928. Sometimes Fisher would recruit Lucy, her brother and sisters, who attended Lincoln School one mile away, to lend a hand with his tasks on weekends.

"Have you ever pushed a dry mop down the halls? Banged erasers in a gunny sack against the wall in the basement? We did that," Erickson said. "At that time they had a cafeteria on the third floor, and the cafeteria ladies would leave us chocolate pudding because they knew we had to come in and work. So we always had a treat."

Nearly 80 years later, Erickson is still surrounded by schoolchildren and teachers. She is now in her 25th year of post-retirement, part-time work at Washington Elementary School in Park Ridge, currently as a member of Park Ridge-Niles School District 64's Senior Tax Exchange program. Prior to this work, Erickson held two different jobs at the school spanning 22 years.

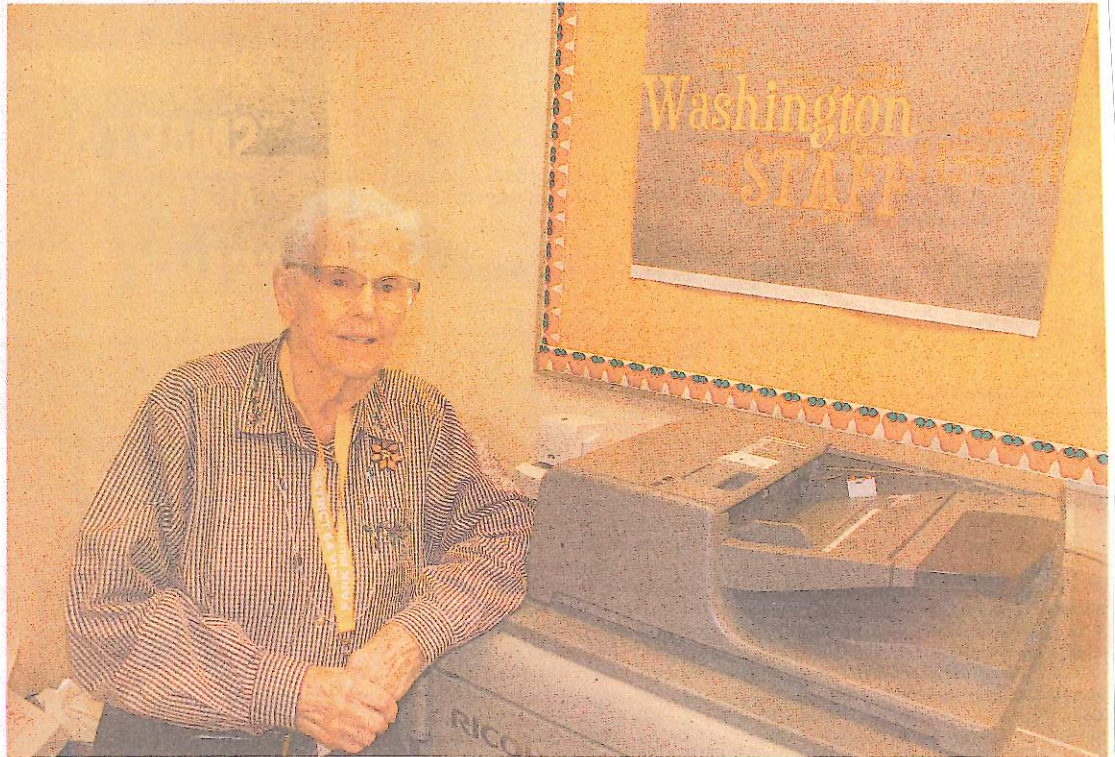
"If you want to be where the teachers treat you like a queen, come work here," Erickson says. "When they meet me in the hall, they call me an angel. And they'll take time out of their breaks to come down and say hello. It's family. They call us family and I get treated like staff. Of course, I'm here a lot, so some people think that's what I am."

Two mornings a week, Erickson can be found in Washington's basement, making photocopies of lessons, laminating pages or creating bound books out of student writing assignments. Now 86 years old and a grandmother of seven, she has no plans for a second retirement.

"They really keep you very busy," she said. "You don't have to worry about standing around looking busy — you are. It's a good job."

Erickson is paid \$8.25 per hour through the Senior Tax Exchange program, which provides part-time jobs for residents 55 years and older and is aimed at helping them earn money to pay their property tax bill to the district. Prior to the start of the program in 1997, she was an unpaid volunteer at Washington.

Outside of living in Arlington Heights for a few years early in her marriage, Erickson has been a life-long Park Ridgean and a witness to a lot of city history.



Lucy Erickson has been working at Washington School in Park Ridge in various roles since 1967. | JENNIFER JOHNSON/PIONEER PRESS

Her memories of growing up in Park Ridge — then surrounded by farmland and open fields — included ice skating at South Park and where Park Ridge Presbyterian Church's parking lot now stands. On Saturday afternoons, 10-cent films at the Pickwick Theatre were the activity of choice.

"If you had any extra money, you didn't buy candy in the theater — it was too expensive. You bought it in the candy store, two stores before you got to the theater," she said.

Park Ridge was also a community where children felt safe, Erickson recalled.

"We used to walk back from the theater at midnight and not have to worry about anything," she said. "I lived across the street from Lincoln School, so that was quite a walk."

While attending Maine High School (now Maine East), Erickson got a job at Moheiser's clothing store in Uptown, a job she held for a number of years. In 1950, when Erickson married her husband, Melvin —

who owned a bike shop on Touhy Avenue — the ceremony took place on the Moheiser family farm in Lake County.

Erickson also worked at the Coffee Cup, located next to the former Gillick Realty on Main Street. Members of prominent Park Ridge families of the day — the Gillicks and the Bachmans, in particular — would frequent the cafe for lunch, Erickson recalled.

"We had a small town. All of these people you really knew," she said. "I'd go shopping with my mother on Saturdays and it would take us all day because you couldn't get through town without meeting everybody you knew."

The Ericksons raised four sons in Park Ridge, the boys attending Carpenter and Lincoln. In 1967, Erickson got a job as a library (learning center) aide at Washington School, and seven years later she became a secretary there until her retirement in 1989.

One of the notable District 64 leaders Erickson met through the years was Ray Hendee, the former superintendent for

whom the district's educational services center at 164 S. Prospect is named.

"Dr. Hendee was top drawer," Erickson said, recalling how he asked her to teach him how to knit after he saw her doing her own knitting during school board meetings she was required to attend as president of the Carpenter School PTA.

"He said, 'Lucy, I think you should teach me to knit so I get something done, too,'" she said with a laugh. "He was a marvelous person."

Today, Erickson is earning appreciation from current administrators. Stephanie Daly, principal of Washington School, called Erickson "the most important person on our staff."

"The staff and students at Washington rely on her dedication and hard work on a daily basis," she said. "She comes into school on Tuesday and Fridays ready to work the copy machine. The love she has for Washington and the Park Ridge community is untouchable."