

'Season of Joy' at Georgia College: Decking the Halls with Dr. Whipple

Dr. Harriett Whipple, professor emerita, has been decorating Georgia's Old Governor's Mansion since the early 1980s. She used to help Sue Speir, wife of Georgia College & State University past President Edwin Speir Jr., decorate back when the mansion was still used as the president's residence.

"It was nothing like it is today," Whipple said. "Back then, we had a few Milledgeville Garden Club volunteers. Now, Georgia College has revamped the whole decorating process to include more volunteers and decorations."

Whipple has been a member of the Milledgeville Garden Club since she came to Georgia College in 1968 as a faculty member teaching botany and biology. The club still helps decorate the mansion every year.

Through the decades,

Whipple has seen the different phases of the mansion's decorations. She enjoyed meeting the people who've helped decorate the mansion, most of whom are connected to Georgia College. Among them were J. Whitney Bunting's wife, Mildred, who decorated the mansion for years and Sandra Flagg, whose husband worked in the physical plant, helped Whipple decorate for more than a decade.

Other beloved volunteers have included the late Ginger Carter, professor emerita of communication; Jane Dorman, wife of past President Dr. Steve Dorman; Sherrill Jones, the first Georgia College student Whipple ever met in 1968, whose husband worked in IT; Teresa Barman, whose husband was a professor; and hundreds of student volunteers who all contributed

to make the OGM festive for the holidays.

"I just love meeting the students," Whipple said. "I always ask them, 'Where are you from?'"

Whipple added she's worked with student volunteers from Ukraine, Vietnam, China and across Georgia.

"It's so nice to see students from different backgrounds getting to know each other," Whipple said. "Even though they have different majors, they work together. I always let the students know how much I appreciate them."

She's had education majors work with school-teachers from the local Garden Club.

"The interconnectedness of all these groups makes decorating fun," she said. "Where else would they get to do anything like this? Students need to know that Georgia College is

so much more than just a place to study. It's a whole community effort here."

The students often share with Whipple stories and photos of their family's holiday traditions and décor, and many say they want to bring their parents back to see the mansion fully decorated.

Even with a small army of volunteers, Whipple knows the magic of Christmas at the Mansion also relies on dedicated Georgia College staff members like the facilities team.

"John Bridges of Facilities is the star in getting that 22-and-a-half-foot tree up," she said. "Physical Plant staff has also helped us a lot."

With decorating wrapped up in mid-November, a new holiday event called "Prance 'n' Dance" kicked off the holiday season at the mansion Nov. 15. Historic dance instructor Stephanie Hetherton led a group of more than 30 guests in a variety of 19th century dances.

"I call this era the 'melting pot' of dancing because you have influences from the French, English, Irish, Scottish, Polish and Germanic countries," Hetherton said.

The "called" dances are less intimidating to dancers. The caller (Hetherton) instructs participants throughout the dance to keep everyone in step together as a group.

"It's wonderfully fun to participate and observe these dances from the sidelines," Hetherton said. "Though many historic figures look stoic in their captured images, they liked to have fun and make merriment just as much as today's modern person."

Georgia's Old Governor's



CAROLINE WOOD/GCSU

A 22-foot tall Christmas tree rises through the central rotunda in Georgia's Old Governor's Mansion.



ANNA GAY LEAVITT/GCSU

Students, staff and fellow Milledgeville Garden Club members take a break from decorating to gather around Dr. Harriett Whipple, center front.

Mansion will celebrate Christmas at the Mansion through Dec. 23 with tours available on the hour Tuesday through Saturday 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and Sunday 2 to 4 p.m.

There are also two more special events this season. Candlelight Tours are

Dec. 6 and Dec. 20 with tour times starting at 6, 7 and 8 p.m. There is also a popular Santa Photo Night on Thursday, Dec. 11, from 6 to 8 p.m. Guests must purchase tickets in advance for these events.

— Contributed by Margaret Schell