

Shooting on Location

By Lila Sanger

Published in the Jefferson Journal Newsletter

The notice posted in the elevator read, “DO YOU WANT TO BE A MOVIE STAR.” It continued in smaller letters: “Do you walk to neighborhood shops, restaurants, entertainment or Malls? If so, AARP would like to interview you.” I was dubious about the movie star bit, but otherwise intrigued.

I dialed the phone number. A woman’s voice answered, “Jana speaking.” She explained that AARP’s Public Policy Institute was shooting a five minute film for their website, featuring senior citizens living in the Ballston area. Jana and I chatted about my qualifications---I DO walk to neighborhood shops, and so on, and she scheduled an interview with me at The Jefferson for the following day. The interview lasted an hour. Robin is a documentary film maker for STREETFILMS, a New York City based nonprofit organization that shoots videos advocating “livable street planning.” She pinned a tiny microphone to my blouse, the kind worn by television hosts, and their guests. Jana began her questions. Or rather, her first and only question. If I hesitated along the way, she simply gestured with her hand for me to keep talking.

Her question was, “Lila, when and why did you move into The Jefferson?” This is how I answered.” I moved into The Jefferson six years ago, two years after the death of my husband, Mike. In addition to its many amenities, there were two other reasons I chose The Jefferson; Its location, and its location; I liked the hustle and bustle of the pedestrians, and the blaring of the fire engines and ambulances. Growing up in New York City, I realized you can take the girl out of the city, but you can’t take the city out of the girl. So the first reason was that The Jefferson was situated in Ballston.

The second was The Jefferson’s location in Arlington County. Although when I moved in, I didn’t realize how important the County would prove to be. To understand why Arlington County was so important, I have to back track a bit and tell you some things about my pre-Jefferson life. I have been a potter for over fifty years. While Mike was deployed overseas in the 1950s, I took evening courses at a community center in White Plains, New York. I looked forward to those evenings, as I found great pleasure in learning pottery and in the social contact with other adult students.

By the time my husband returned 16 months later, I had become a proficient potter, able to work on my own. We decided to build a Pottery Studio for me in our home. From its rude beginnings in the utility room, next to the washer and dryer, it was slowly transformed into a lovely studio, built where our sun porch had been. Mike added 240v wiring for my two large kilns; I bought four pottery wheels and all the other accoutrements that a professional potter requires. I started to teach pottery to adults in the morning and to children after school. The rest of the time I threw my own pots, making stone wear plates, saucers, cups and casseroles, which I sold in local craft shows, or gave to friends and family.

But when I moved into The Jefferson, I not only downsized my home, but downsized the studio as well. Indeed, I down sized it into a shoe box, having given the wheels, the kilns, the glazes and the wedging table to my pottery friends. For old time sake, I kept my tools and brushes in an old shoebox. I had hoped to continue making pottery at The Jefferson. But when I saw their kiln on the garage floor, in several pieces, and in need of repair, I knew I would have to look elsewhere. Once settled, I hoped I could find a place to work, perhaps at a local high school, or a private studio. But my search was fruitless.

Arlington County came to the rescue! Fortune smiled on me when I came across the Arlington Event Calendar which featured the story of The Lee Arts Center, just minutes from The Jefferson. The Center, part of Arlington Cultural Affairs Division, was a former elementary school, and the building renovated. The second floor was devoted to studios for ceramics and print making. Both had an "Open Studio" program for individuals with advanced levels of ability in ceramics or print making. Membership included those who no longer had work places of their own. Arlington must have had ME in mind. There was no instruction and all members shared in the technical tasks essential to the operation of the studios. For a nominal fee, I had full use of several large kilns, some twenty electric wheels, and a glazing room; everything one would wish for in a large, clean, well run studio. After three months on the wait list, I was juried in.

I worked at The Lee Pottery Studio three or four mornings each week, and it was my home away from home for 4 years. I was able to remain an active potter and to reclaim that important part of my life where I could express my creative abilities.

The Lee Arts Center was just the first of several ways Arlington County enhanced my life in retirement. A year ago I gave my station wagon to a granddaughter. I realized that The Jefferson Transportation service was more than adequate for my trips to doctors, shopping malls, and grocery stores. Residents are taken to The Kennedy Center for an opera, ballet or symphony performance, as well as dining out in the areas notable restaurants. It is a delight to be driven to these events, and at their conclusion, to be whisked safely back home in comfort. And a 'shout out' for our wonderful drivers'!

Where The Jefferson transportation ended, Arlington County picked up. The extensive County transit system provided almost door to door coverage to my various craft supply stores. For example, the A 1 bus, running from Ballston to Vienna, can bring me to my old haunts at Seven Corners. For 75 five cents, using Arlington's smart card for senior citizens, I can be at my destination in fifteen minutes. I have only to walk through the park outside The Jefferson's front door, and I am at the Ballston Bus Terminal or the Metro Station. Arlington County offers reduced price tickets for senior bus or metro passengers at their Commuter Store, located at the Metro Station. One more of Arlington's benefits.

I am not saying that learning to be independent is all that easy. I planned my first bus trip like Ike planned D Day: timing, weather, maps and back up plans. Having used NYC public transportation for the first 20 years of my life, why should I have had any trepidation about a 15 minute bus trip? But I was now an octogenarian, not a 20 year old lass. When I got to the bus shelter, the one bench provided was already filled with women and their children, but as I approached, they all snuggled together to create a space for me. Once seated in the bus, most of the bench sitters seemed to know that I was a green-horn, and watchfully kept their eyes on me, to see I didn't get off too soon. When we arrived at Seven Corners, many

heads glanced in my direction, and in Spanglish, told me this was where I wanted to get off. Their kindness and interest touched me, the tableau of that day will remain with me forever.

I made my way home without incident, even pulling the white cord to indicate my stop. I was proud of myself when I got off the bus---so delighted with my spunkiness that one would have thought I had swum the English Channel. I excitedly called my adult children, long distance, to tell them what I had accomplished. Thanks to the wise planning of Arlington County, I opened new doors for myself, asserting my independence, but relying on a few kind bus riders to ease the way for me.

Well, back to the AARP interview. The next day I met with Robin early in the morning, to finish up the interview. The last shot needed was some film of me; waiting for the bus, getting on the bus, and actually riding in it for a few minutes. Perhaps those shots will be cut from the film and will not be shown. I imagine most of the film has met its fate on the cutting room floor, since it is only five minutes long. I doubt that I shall have my 15 minutes of fame, let alone become a movie star. But I am indebted to the County of Arlington for having created an environment that enhances the lives of its citizens. It was, and continues to be, a precious gift.