

Remembering the remarkable Jo Ruck: The ‘Cookie Lady’

Visitors to the Del Webb Sun Cities Museum often leave with photos of themselves standing by two of the museum’s most popular attractions: a life-sized cardboard cutout of Sun City Founder Del Webb and a life-sized cutout of a woman known simply as “The Cookie Lady.”

Del Webb needs no introduction, and most visitors are quick to recognize his significance to the history of the Sun Cities.

The Cookie Lady standing in the kitchen, however, is a bit more mysterious and her significance and relation to the museum often goes unnoticed. But many are surprised to learn the Cookie Lady is, indeed, a real person.

Jo Ruck, better known as the “Cookie Lady,” passed away Oct. 21, 2023.

Next to the life-sized cutout of Del Webb in the living room, Jo remains the most recognizable person in the museum.

As visitors enter the kitchen of the Del Webb Sun Cities Museum, they are greeted by the cutout -- standing with a tray of cookies, her smile welcoming visitors.

Ms. Ruck was a Sun Cities Area Historical Society board member from 2003 through 2007 and a volunteer for many more years. The Sun Cities Area Historical Society was founded in 1985 and is the owner of the Del Webb Sun Cities Museum.

Ms. Ruck, along with Trustees David Verble and Ed Allen, are among those primarily responsible for converting a small house holding historical records into an attention-getting and informative museum that is today’s Del Webb Sun Cities Museum.

The museum is located at 10801



The Cookie Lady as she stands today in the kitchen of the Del Webb Sun Cities Museum. Former Board Trustee Jo Ruck served as the model for the cardboard cutout. Shown here is the Cookie Lady at last year’s holiday open house.

W. Oakmont Drive in Sun City, in one of the first five model homes constructed and on display when the community first opened in 1960. The Sun Cities Area Historical Society purchased the house in 1989.

“When Jo, David, and I came on the scene in early 2000, the building was a quiet resting spot for past newspaper articles, sales and marketing materials used over the years, and a trove of 3,000 historical photographs rescued when the Webb organization cleaned its files of Sun City material, as it focused on building Sun City West,” recalls Ed Allen.

The front bedroom looked out to the street and docents like to do their clipping of articles and copy-

ing on acid-free, museum-quality paper, while watching for visitors coming up to the house. A favored activity was clipping the obituaries of local residents, gluing them to index cards and placing them in a special file.

Minor attempts were made at displays -- mostly consisting of Xerox copies of some of the photos with typewritten captions. Nothing over a single page and all in black and white.

With an eye toward enhancing the home’s usefulness and appeal, the three board members invited two exhibit designers from the Arizona Historical Museum in Tempe to visit the SCAHS and suggest how the rooms might be used for exhibits.

Their main contribution involved the living room, which they suggested should be divided diagonally -- half for a look back at a 1960’s model home, and the other half for exhibits showcasing the early days. Ms. Rusk and Mr. Verble proved skillful at finding suitable furniture, and getting furnishings donated.

A friend made the living room drapes -- and then reupholstered the chair next to them to better match -- all material and services donated, thanks to Ms. Ruck.

“Both Jo and David loved visiting garage sales and second-hand shops,” said Mr. Allen. “One day, they came upon a business that had several glass counter units for sale -- \$100 each, and you hauled them away. Jo not only got us two of the units for \$100 but got the seller to deliver them to us,” he recalled.

The glass counters today showcase Del Webb memorabilia in the Del Webb Room.

On another trip, Jo and a set designer from a Sun City West theater club visited carpet shops,

and finally found one with some of the thick, sculpted design common to the 1960s. The carpet installer admitted he'd never had an installation quite like this one.

The one thing they couldn't find, however, was a volunteer to be a 1960 housewife at work in her kitchen – and finally convinced Jo to pose as that person. Her son-in-law took the photo for the cutout eventually made by ImageCraft in Phoenix.

“We had created a life-size cutout of Del Webb that greets visitors in the living room. Visitors liked to stand alongside and have their pictures taken. It gave us the idea to have a 1960's Sun Citian cut-out in the kitchen,” recalled Mr. Allen.

“What better than a housewife from that period? We offered the

opportunity to be immortalized in this manner to several of the docents, but no one volunteered. David and I turned to Jo and said, ‘You're it!’”

It's common for visitors to ask about the “Cookie Lady,” and the story behind the cutout was written by Ed Allen, who also served as president of the historical society. A copy of Ed's story is today tucked inside her apron.

Ms. Ruck and her husband, George, moved to Sun City West in 1993 from the Mount Prospect and Crystal Lake areas of Illinois. George was a talented woodworker and crafted the shelf-display unit in the living room. George passed away in 2019, and Jo moved to Richardson, Texas to be near her daughter. She remained a long-time

member of the museum.

She also served on the Sun City West 25th Anniversary Book Committee and assisted Mr. Allen, who is credited as the primary editor of the book. The book was finished in time for the 25th anniversary celebration and is still in print today as the community's 40th anniversary year approaches.

“I wouldn't say Jo was shy, but she wasn't at all sure that this was a part she wanted to play. She preferred to remain in the background – unless it was the front lines of negotiating a deal! But we wore her down, and here nearly 20 years later, she lives on as the ‘Cookie Lady’ at the Del Webb Sun Cities Museum,” said Mr. Allen.
