

COMMUNITY NEWS

Virginia Politics

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Queen Elizabeth pens letter to Gov. McDonnell

You might have heard that the Queen of England is celebrating her Diamond Jubilee (that's 60 years as monarch).

But what you might not know is that Virginia is helping her celebrate.

Gov. Robert F. McDonnell (R), House Speaker Bill Howell and Lord Alan Watson, a member of the House of Lords, planted a tree on Capitol Square in her honor Tuesday (although you wouldn't know it from the governor's schedule, which mistakenly left three events off his public calendar).

Alas, Prince Harry, who was in Washington this week planting his own maple tree, did not fight the traffic on Interstate 95 to attend Virginia's festivities.

Watson, who co-authored a book exploring the Queen's relationship with the United States and Virginia, presented McDonnell with a letter from Her Majesty.

"When you get a letter from the Queen, you hang on to it," Watson said.

Virginia, of course, has a special place in Queen Elizabeth's heart. She wowed elected officials when she came for a visit five years ago for Jamestown's 400th anniversary.

"I've never received a letter from a queen before, other than my wife," McDonnell quipped.

The two-sentence letter addressed to "The Honourable Bob McDonnell" states: "The Queen was interested to learn about the tree planting which is taking place in Virginia today to commemorate the Sixtieth Anniversary of her Accession to the

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CHRIS JACKSON/GETTY IMAGES

Queen Elizabeth II is celebrating her 60th year as ruler of Great Britain.

Just call it germ warfare

Alexandria mother helps put thermometers in city students' back-to-school packets

BY PATRICIA SULLIVAN

When Angela Drake learned that several Alexandria children would go to school when they were sick, she "could not wrap my head around it," she said, because her 8-year-old daughter took every opportunity to stay home whenever she was running a temperature.

Drake, who used to work as a nurse and was just starting to participate in Alexandria's Parent Leadership Training Institute, knew the dangers of feverish or infectious children sharing desks and computers, touching doorknobs and using playgrounds. But it wasn't until she interviewed school nurses, counselors, social workers, school psychologists and principals that she realized how common it is to have a sick kid in class.

"Everyone knew it's a problem, so how come I didn't know?" she asked herself at the time.

She wasn't alone. Parents often don't recognize when their child is really sick because many don't have a basic tool of family health — a thermometer.

Drake had found her project. After months of research, reaching out to community leaders and organizing a small army of civic-minded residents, she figured out a way to provide every elementary school child in the city with a digital thermometer, instructions on how to use it and a magnet printed with health tips. It will be distributed in September in the schools' back-to-school packets.

The PLTI, which has been operating in Alexandria since 2006, chooses 20 to 25 parents of diverse backgrounds and gives them 20 weeks of free but intensive lessons in how to make civic change happen for children in the community. The institute's Web site is www.plti-alex.org.

Fay Slotnick, PLTI's executive director, said Drake's project — like earlier initiatives to teach children financial literacy after school, provide respite care for parents of students with disabilities or set up peer mentoring — took on a life of its own.

"It would never have occurred to me that thermometers were an issue," Slotnick said. Drake "had just a remarkable attitude, and showed persistence and networking."

The lessons PLTI taught her include such challenges as how to overcome roadblocks, Drake said. Early on, people would listen politely but never get back to her; she learned to cast her net wider.

"It's like fishing," Drake said. "We know



PATRICIA SULLIVAN/THE WASHINGTON POST

Angela Drake at Walgreens on King Street, which donated 7,000 thermometers. The former nurse is leading a project to fight the spread of infection among schoolchildren.

a lot of fish are out there, but who's going to bite?"

She also learned that she had skills that she didn't know about. As a nurse, she was used to listening but found that she had to start talking to get others to join with her.

"The funny thing is, the more I talked about it, the more validation I got," Drake

"It's like fishing. We know a lot of fish are out there, but who's going to bite?"

Angela Drake, on the outreach skills she learned from a leadership program involved with the effort

said.

Drake was quick to credit her partners in the effort: Alexandria Mayor Bill Euille, who gave her advice and an introduction to the manager of the Walgreens store on King Street; that Walgreens store manager, Chris Mizera, who arranged the donation of 7,000 thermometers; her mentor, Adrienne Fikes, who introduced

her to Anne McIntyre, a marketing professional who donated her services; and Ben Roberts, creative director of Sixhalfdozen.com design studio.

There's plenty of work for Drake to do in leading this project. She wants to put posters up in the schools to encourage students to be accountable for their own health, but first she must clear their design and wording with school district officials. Other donations might be added to the back-to-school packets, and Drake has to make sure they are appropriate for the schools.

Suddenly, after 18 years in Alexandria and sending two children through its schools, Drake said she understands what a community really is.

"I feel so connected," she said. "I'm very careful now where I eat. I want to support the places that are here. I've lived a lot of places," because her father was in the military.

"I always saw my mother doing service work, church work, and I never understood why . . . Now, I feel it. I'm present. Now I'm not just a participant. I'm creating."

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