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## You can't refuse Sandy Thurston

By Karen Florin

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Dana Jensen/The Day

Sandy Thurston, a volunteer with the High Hopes Therapeutic Riding Center in Old Lyme, nuzzles Major, one of the horses at the center.

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**Lyme** -- Sitting in the kitchen of her century-old home on Joshuatown Road, Sandy Thurston squirms when a visitor asks for a rundown of all her volunteer activities.

She is more comfortable talking about "Bucky," the deer that grazes unabashedly in the back yard, or her black Lab, Ruby, who sleeps at her feet.

Fortunately, her husband, Tony, another consummate volunteer, jumps in with a page-long list he prepared ahead of time knowing Sandy is so modest. She is deeply involved in High Hopes Therapeutic Riding Center, the Florence Griswold Museum, the Child & Family Agency of Southeastern Connecticut and the Musical Masterworks program.

Tall and trim in blue jeans, vest and ponytail, Thurston is a no-nonsense woman without the sternness one associates with that quality. She likes to be busy and knows how to recruit help.

"You can't turn me down," she says. "It can't take up that much time."

At High Hopes, she is co-chairwoman of the Symphony in the Meadow, the organization's largest fundraiser. About 600 people will attend the June 9, 2012, event at which organizers hope to generate about \$200,000 for the renowned riding center. Thurston already is on top of details such as obtaining permits, insurance and a liquor license.

But won't she be stressed out come Symphony day?

"No," she says. "You just make a list and pull things together."

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Kitty Stalsburg, executive director of High Hopes, says, "You name it, she does it. Sandy is one of those people you can call when you need something."

Last winter, High Hopes had a last-minute opportunity to take part in the Old Saybrook Chamber of Commerce's chili fest. They weren't sure how to go about making 10 gallons of chili, so Thurston got on the phone with some of her catering friends.

The next thing Stalsburg knew, volunteers were in the kitchen of the Old Lyme Congregational Church, chopping vegetables. The chili had to be made in a certified kitchen, kept hot and transported to the event in the proper containers.

Thurston made it happen, and she made it look easy.

"She just kind of quietly comes and does her thing, no fanfare," says Jeffrey Anderson, director of the Florence Griswold Museum. "It's not about me, me, me. It's about how can I help. She's probably one of the most well-liked people I've ever met. People are drawn to her."

Thurston is part of the Old Lyme museum's Garden Gang, which meets every Friday and tends to the elaborately landscaped property. She has her own impressive gardens at home, and has twice opened up her home for the Child & Family Agency's garden tour fundraiser.

Asking people to donate money is no problem for Thurston. If they say no, she tells them maybe she'll call again next year. She knows the economy is bad, but says, "That \$10 or \$20 helps if everybody would give."

Works the phone and computer

This time of year, Thurston is busy with the Flo Gris' Christmas events. She helps decorate the Fantasy Tree exhibit and is a buyer for the Christmas shop, which sells thousands of ornaments each year. She and Tony are happy to host a cocktail party to inspire volunteers and donors, and she is the type of person who sees a need and acts on it. Hearing that the New York Botanical Gardens lost a number of trees during this year's storms, she suggested to the Garden Gang that they donate one. Done.

Thurston is a familiar sight at the museum, where Anderson says she slips in unobtrusively during the summer months to tend to the mammoth pots of annuals and the masses of perennials. She is a regular at High Hopes, too, where she helps out in the office when needed. But most of her volunteer work is done at home, where she works the phone and computer until she gets what she needs.

"I'd rather be behind the scenes," she says. "I don't like being out front."

Try taking her picture for a newspaper article, and she attempts to shift the photographer's focus to the others in the room. Try talking about her work in the museum's gardens and she mentions the women in their 90s who still get on their knees there to pull weeds.

Thurston has spent summers and weekends in Lyme since childhood. She and Tony raised their children in Manhattan, where he worked for a top advertising firm and she ran an antiques business. They retired and in 1993 moved to the Lyme home that once belonged to her grandmother, Harriet Masten. Thurston was "kicking and screaming," her husband said, but quickly became involved in the community. Her two daughters, Dana Evans and Lisa Reneson, and their families live nearby. They, too, are active volunteers.

Thurston doesn't over-think her role as a giver.

"It's just what I do," she says. "I enjoy it." She and Tony didn't have much time to volunteer when they were living in New York, but in retirement neither are the type to sit around and watch TV, she says.

Growing up an only child in New York, she learned by example from her mother, who was an active volunteer. She says she gained strength and independence as a young married woman, when she lived in Milan while her husband was there on business. It was 1966, and she was pregnant. "It was scary. You had to sink or swim. You had to be on your own. You had to entertain yourself. You had to go to the doctor."

She had a craving for sour cream and could not find any in the local markets.

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"I simply got into my car and went up to Switzerland," she says.

Her philosophy in life, she says, is to "take it one step at a time and pray for the best." She thinks people are basically good, though she doesn't wear "rose colored glasses."

Asked what she would like to do in her spare time, Thurston says she would love to get Ruby, the black Lab, involved in dog therapy.

When her husband asks her if she ever takes a nap, she says "If I do, you know I'm really sick."

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