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by

WORKING TO STRENGTHEN DETROIT COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS

By Sarah Tuxbury

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hen Kathy Makino-Leipsitz was a preteen, she took some of the babysitting money she'd earned in her working-class Westland neighborhood and used it for bus fare to Detroit.

"I wanted to go downtown and shop at Hudson's. I heard it had seven floors," the 1983 alumna said about her solo journey downtown in the 1970s.

Looking out the bus window, she felt connected to Detroit. The connection was strong enough so that a decade later, as soon as she was able to, she bought her first Detroit property. It was the same year she earned her UM-Dearborn diploma.

"It was a 30-unit historic building on West Alexandrine Street. I saw the potential for the area; at that time it was known as the Cass Corridor, now it's Midtown. The building was like a piece of art to me," she said.

Today, Makino-Leipsitz's company, Shelborne Development, has rehabilitated several buildings it owns in Detroit, focusing on New Center, Palmer Park and the East Jefferson corridor. Currently she owns more than 25 buildings in the city, which represents almost 1,000 apartment units.

Makino-Leipsitz is one of many University of Michigan-Dearborn community members—alumni, students, faculty and staff—drawn to the potential of the 314-year-old city and ready to roll up her sleeves to work to transform Detroit. ►

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a dark, double-breasted suit with gold buttons, stands in a doorway. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. The doorway is framed by dark wood with intricate carvings. The interior behind her is dimly lit, showing a chandelier and a lamp. The floor is polished wood, reflecting the light from the doorway.

“Details like plaster archways, original wood floors and cove ceilings, are seen throughout the structures. . . .They are beautiful and, in my opinion, irreplaceable.”

— Kathy Makino-Leipsitz

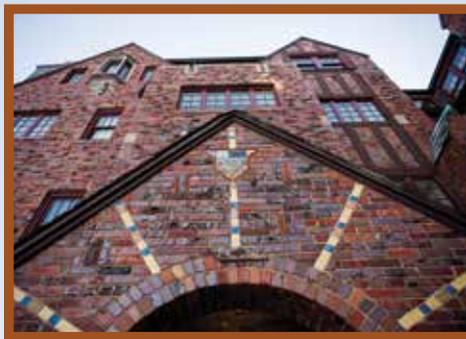


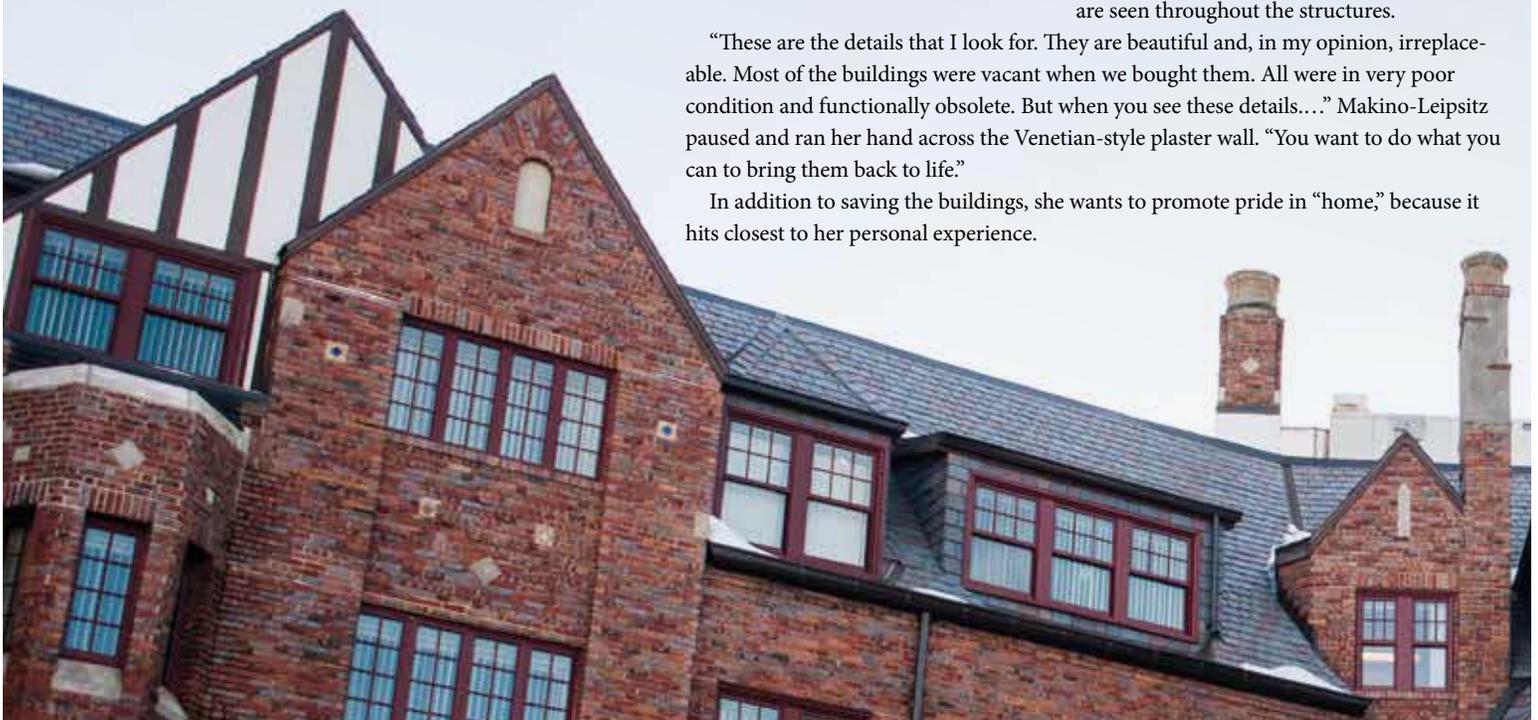
PHOTO BY RACHEL SHOMSKY

TAKING PRIDE: HOME IS WHERE IT STARTS

At one of the Palmer Park properties, Makino-Leipsitz points out Pewabic tiles on the exterior's entrance. Some of the lobbies have ornate fireplaces and beautiful crown moldings. Character details like plaster archways, original wood floors and cove ceilings, are seen throughout the structures.

“These are the details that I look for. They are beautiful and, in my opinion, irreplaceable. Most of the buildings were vacant when we bought them. All were in very poor condition and functionally obsolete. But when you see these details...” Makino-Leipsitz paused and ran her hand across the Venetian-style plaster wall. “You want to do what you can to bring them back to life.”

In addition to saving the buildings, she wants to promote pride in “home,” because it hits closest to her personal experience.





Makino-Leipsitz, who was the youngest of five children, said her hardworking father became disabled when she was 12. “I remember him struggling to support his family off his Social Security check of \$368 a month,” she said.

Makino-Leipsitz went to school near Norwayne, a low-income neighborhood in Westland, in what was known as “Shack Town.”

“Kids knew poorer people lived in those square, box buildings with flat roofs. Some of my friends were made fun of. It was so unfair; children can’t choose where they live. Even as a child, you could sometimes feel their embarrassment,” she said, adding that because they lived in a house, no one knew her family had less income than most of those friends. “I knew I wanted to build beautiful, affordable places to live; people should feel proud of where they call home.”

She bought her first duplex in Norwayne at 19 and had her realtor’s license by the time she graduated college.

After several smart building investments, Makino-Leipsitz developed her first Low Income Housing Tax Credit project through the Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA) in 1995, and has since worked on more than 20 additional affordable housing projects.

“This is what I love to do,” she said. “Preserving history is important, and so is giving people a reason to take pride in where they live. If someone has positive memories of their home and their city, that person might stay and work to give the same to the next generation.” ➤

