



# Making It Big in Millsboro

Alice Hudson gave back to her community by reviving civic celebration

BY JAMES DIEHL

**S**he's been a wife, a mother, an entrepreneur, an art teacher, a civic leader and the first female president of the Greater Millsboro Chamber of Commerce.

But the name of Alice Hudson will always be synonymous with one thing in and around her beloved Millsboro: the Big Thursday celebration.

In fact, the annual gathering that features live music, good food and ample community fellowship in Cupola Park — at the headwaters of the Indian River — would never have been revived without the former downtown Millsboro business owner.

"I'm just so happy with the way Big Thursday has turned out," she says with a grin. "It's really become like a congregation of neighbors who look forward to gathering together once every year. It's just marvelous."

Arriving in Millsboro in 1967 as a newly widowed mother of two, Hudson soon opened her first clothing store on Main Street. Struggling financially, she relied on the "good people of Millsboro" to survive — and survive she did.

"The people of Millsboro gave me so much and that's why I'm so involved in things now. I just want to give something back to them because they kept me afloat all those years," she says. "I think God had a lot to do with my life because I was broke when I came to Millsboro. ►

**Alice Hudson revels in the success of Big Thursday, an annual festival in Millsboro that she helped revive over 30 years ago to show her pride in the town.**

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## Profile

I didn't even know where my next meal was coming from sometimes."

The biggest way Hudson gave back to her adopted hometown was by restarting the traditional Big Thursday celebration, which dates back to 1852 when the state first regulated the opening of the oyster-harvesting season.

Beginning that year, Delaware law prohibited the taking of oysters between May 1 and Aug. 10. Residents waited patiently for opening day when they busted loose with a fun-filled day of tonging and eating oysters — and the Big Thursday festival was born.

Once held throughout Kent and Sussex counties, the annual festival faded away, except in nearby Oak Orchard, where it survived until the mid-20th century.

It then became nothing more than a distant memory until Hudson, as the president of the local chamber of commerce in 1972, organized downtown merchants and revived the tradition.

"Big Thursday is just a wonderful chance for all of us to come together and showcase the wonderful beauty of our town," she says.

**Family:** one son, Thomas; one daughter, Virginia; three stepchildren, Janice, Jack and Melissa.

**Birthplace:** Matthew County, Va. (near Yorktown)

**Career:** Owned and operated Alice's Clothes Tree in Millsboro and Long Neck

**Why did you want to revive the Big Thursday celebration in 1972?** It actually started out as a copycat of the Old Timers Day celebration in Selbyville, because I saw how successful that festival had become.

[Big Thursday] was a very historic name and I had a lot of local people encouraging me to name [the new festi-

val] Big Thursday. It was new to me; I had never heard it before. But I did some research and that's what we decided to name it.

My sales clerks and I went around contacting different business people downtown and all the merchants helped with it that first year.

Big Thursday was always held on the second Thursday of August, and that's still when we have it now. But it's really grown over the years.

## Big Festival Slated

**What:** Millsboro Big Thursday festival

**When:** Aug. 14, chamber auction at the Millsboro Civic Center, 6 p.m.; Aug. 15, 5 to 10 p.m.; Aug. 16, 10 a.m. to 10 p.m.

**Where:** Cupola Park on the shores of the Indian River

**Highlights:** Food, crafts, games, live music, car show. Free admission.

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**What makes the Big Thursday celebration so special?** It was a success from the start because we incorporated the Boy Scouts, the Girl Scouts and all the merchants. It always has been a community-driven project that was really started to help the local businesses in Millsboro with sales.

I think it's worked out wonderfully.

**When you first re-created the festival, what was your immediate focus?** I don't think I really knew what I was doing — most of the time I don't. Big Thursday just sort of hit at the heart of Millsboro, Oak Orchard and Long Neck. We thought it would be a good thing to do to promote our community and our whole area.

I was so happy with the way it turned out. I never dreamed it would turn out as well as it did.

**After not being involved with the festival for several years, you recently joined with the Greater Millsboro Chamber of Commerce to once again promote Big Thursday? Why is that?** Well, the town now has kind of split with the shopping centers and different stores going out on Route 113. It was like having a division of businesses and I thought it would be nice to pull them all together by having the festival in one place. (For years, the festival had been spread out among several different locations.)

And Cupola Park is such a beautiful place with the water and everything, but it also needed to be promoted.

**Tell us about the genesis of the Millsboro Art League. Why create an art league in downtown Millsboro?** Because we had so many great artists who people didn't know about. They would come to me because they knew I taught art to children and tell me about all the things they were painting, but how there was no place to show it. I told them that I thought I could fix that.

So I went downtown and talked to Emma McCabe, who was the head of the library. I asked her if she thought it was feasible for us to hang pictures on the library wall, and she said it was. That's how the Millsboro Art League started.

**Do you feel the art league has been as successful as you hoped it would be back in 1988?** It's been another miracle. They have 190 members now. We have so many people [moving here from other areas] and many have had art training. It makes their transition to our area easier because they can meet each other, learn their

neighbors' names and put on shows. It's just been marvelous.

**What are some of the other organizations you're involved in?** Well, I've been a member of the Millsboro Women's Civic Club ever since it started in the 1960s. It's community-minded and I enjoy that.

I also started the Red Hat Mamas of Millsboro. We wanted to call it the Red Hot Mamas, but we thought that was a little much.

I'm also very involved with St. Mark's [Episcopal] Church in Millsboro, where I had a music program not too long ago on Sunday evenings.

**What's your favorite thing about living in coastal Delaware?** I just love everything. I love the people and I love the environment. From the first day I came to Millsboro, I've loved it. All these new people are coming here because of how beautiful it is. We don't care if they come here, as long as they don't try to change everything.

**What makes Millsboro special in your eyes?**

There are so many things that I like about Millsboro, but the people are what make it so special. Everyone helps each other out. They were what made me successful in my business over the years.

**What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?** I enjoy painting and I like to show my painting at the art league and at the Country Kitchen, which shows all the artists from the Millsboro Art League.

But I'm so active, I don't have time to paint like I used to.

My hobby is really from God. I'm on a mission to help my neighbors in any way I can. I just want to help my fellow man.

**What's your greatest accomplishment in life?** I would have to say my children. They have been my inspiration and my comfort and my everything. They're also my buddies as well as my children and we just have a lot of fun together. ■

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