

**The Star-Ledger**  
Sunday, February 15, 2004  
BY PHILIP READ

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### Montclair cyber club talks of the town

Joan Bujacich once played the piano on Phil Donahue's show. She's played and sang at Asbury Park's famous Stone Pony. But this night was less about the music and more about the chat.

And she was sitting opposite a chatty Danielle Manello.

"I cut my rent by half and got twice the space," said Manello, who recently moved to Montclair from New York's Upper West Side.

"You're congesting our streets," Bujacich replied, half in jest.

"But someone had to leave," Manello said in defense while talking up the virtues of her new hometown. "You hear church bells instead of screams."

The talk was decidedly about Montclair, as it should be. For this was what an online posting referred to as the "PAR-TEE," a gathering to mark the 500th member to sign up at the "Montclair Watercooler," one of the thousands of online chat groups at Yahoo!

"You get to put a voice to the e-mail," said Tom Moloughney, who hosted the party at his Nauna's Bella Casa restaurant in Montclair Wednesday night.

He had already issued a warning to one partygoer.

"Don't make fun of an Irish guy running an Italian restaurant."

As water cooler veterans and neophytes --

people who have collectively tallied more than 16,000 postings in less than four years -- entered the dining room reserved for them, they were met by one of "The BDs," for "Benevolent Despots," charged with policing the online chatter and keeping it Montclair-centric, among other things.

"Exciting as a stockholders meeting," one new arrival said.

"How long have you been in Montclair?" inquired another.

"I've been here since 1987 -- from Wisconsin," said Bob Fisher, one of the "DPs."

Many came carrying more than coats. They came bearing gifts -- for the raffle.

For one, Fisher brought along a \$25 gift certificate to Bacchus Chop House & Wine Bar in Fairfield. As for Bujacich, she brought along two of her CDs.

Other prizes included guest passes to the Montclair Art Museum, dinner for two at Nauna's Bella Casa and less-fanciful voter registration forms and a Montclair township bookmark bearing the inscription "The Place Sheltered by the Mountain."

"I wish it could have been a parking spot," said the donor, Linda Wanat, who as Montclair's township clerk issues parking permits in a town with a scarcity of spaces.

Mary Krugman, the water cooler's founder, was parting with a print of her own original oil painting, called "Morning Wildflowers."

"It's one out of 250. I have 249 more," she said.

The water cooler is something of a high-tech equivalent of a Rotary club or a Knights of Columbus council.

"I wish I could say it has some charitable purposes," Krugman said. "Really what we're doing doesn't raise any money after all, but it does raise community consciousness, which is incredible."

The postings themselves run the gamut, from advice on who to call if a wayward shopping cart is left on your street (it's the code enforcement officer, one recommends) to icy sidewalks.

Adriane O'Toole, a real estate agent in Montclair, said she recommends the water cooler to newcomers looking to move to Montclair. But it's not without some reservations.

"It's the potholes and the plumbers," she said.

There are of course other Yahoo! chat groups keyed to Montclair. There's the seven-member "Montclair Miata Owners" and the 73-member "bikemontclair" for those committed to promoting cycling.

At the water cooler, topics that drift off-topic are redirected to the "Montclair Waterheater," which now boasts 109 members, still a far cry from the water cooler's, which hit 547 members by the morning after the "PAR-TEE."

The water cooler has spawned some other interesting spinoffs, though not necessarily online ones.

Through it, Manello -- fresh from the Upper West Side -- is creating her own restaurant group, which has already dined out once.

"It was such a hit, we're going to do it again and call it "Montclair Eats."

As the raffles were won -- and lost -- singer-pianist Bujacich -- who these days can be

found at Rockaway Township's Caffe Navona playing Cole Porter tunes and the like -- found more fans as she autographed her CD raffle donations. Nearly three hours after the gathering began, she was on her way home with this farewell:

"See you online."

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