

## Early days of Port St. Lucie 'like Camelot', family matriarch recalls

By Christin Erazo

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PORT ST. LUCIE — It was like Camelot.

Beth Gessner, 80, said her son described growing up in Port St. Lucie using the phrase that has become synonymous with John F. Kennedy's presidency and a place of idyllic happiness.

Gessner, her husband Dave and their four children were among the first families to move to the area in 1959.

"It really was an absolutely wonderful, perfect place to raise children," Gessner said. "There was a great mix of retired people and young families. You felt safe."

In a community of 200 homes, where few people had extended family, early Port St. Lucie residents formed a tight-knit group.

Gessner recalls the numerous clubs she joined, beauty pageants at the community center, the monthly cookouts down by the St. Lucie River and the bevy of children who would play outside her front yard.

It was a place where everyone knew their neighbor.

The Gessners and their three children at the time moved from bustling Fort Lauderdale to sleepy Port St. Lucie after Dave Gessner was offered a job by General Development Corporation, the city's developer, to be the community's recreational director.

Dave Gessner eventually became the first vice mayor of Port St. Lucie.

"(GDC) felt the area was supposed to be a retirement community, but there ended up being a lot of young families moving in at the same time and there was nothing organized for families, children and retirees to do," Beth Gessner said.

The Gessners, like many GDC customers, purchased their home, sight unseen, for \$10 down and \$10 a month. Their three-bedroom, two-bath house was located on the south end of Naranja Avenue and Celestia Court.

The retirement-designed community, that extended as far west as Airoso Boulevard, had no grocery stores, churches or hospitals, nor amenities like movie theaters, libraries or bowling alleys. If residents needed to get everyday errands done they had to drive to Fort Pierce or Stuart.

"You had a Piggly Wiggly and a Winn-Dixie in Fort Pierce," Beth Gessner said. "If you wanted to shop for childrens' clothes you went to the mall in West Palm Beach. We were much more efficient then because you didn't want to have to make that drive every time you ran out of something."

With little development surrounding the small community, the Gessner family would seek adventure.

Gessner said she recalls her children swimming in the alligator-infested waters of the St. Lucie River and summer hikes through the rattlesnake-filled woods on the undeveloped land west of the Florida's Turnpike.

"I never thought there were snakes in those woods or that my children could get eaten by an alligator. Were they not as hungry then?" Gessner laughed. "How did we not lose a kid?"

As the population grew, fire departments, police stations and churches began to sprout up.

The first police station, located on Port St. Lucie Boulevard, was the size of a single car garage, said Gessner.

Gessner, who taught in the St. Lucie County school system for more than 24 years, finally felt like Port St. Lucie became a bona fide city when the community opened its first school, Port St. Lucie Elementary in 1975.

Before the school opened, Gessner sent all her children to White City Elementary, which was five miles away from their home. She taught at White City for 12 years to be closer to her children.

Gessner then transferred to Port St. Lucie Elementary, located one mile from her home, and later Morningside Elementary.

Dave Gessner passed away in 2007 and all of the Gessner clan has moved out of Port St. Lucie, but Beth Gessner is determined to stay put. Her two daughters Susan, 55, and Robin, 49, live in Florida, while her sons David, 59, live in Raleigh, N.C. and Mark, 53, in Huntsville, Ala.

For Gessner, Port St. Lucie has an old Florida charm; a quality lost in cities like Miami and Fort Lauderdale.

She considers herself a pioneer of the city, a statement that garners chuckles from friends who have lived in cities much older than Port St. Lucie.

"Living here and seeing the growth of the city, I was more aware and appreciative of things when they did develop," Gessner said. "You don't realize all the blood, sweat and tears it takes for things to develop. I take pride in being able to see and be part of that growth. This is my home."



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