

Tour de force

Alum spreads the good word about Detroit, one group at a time

By **Rebecca Kavanagh**

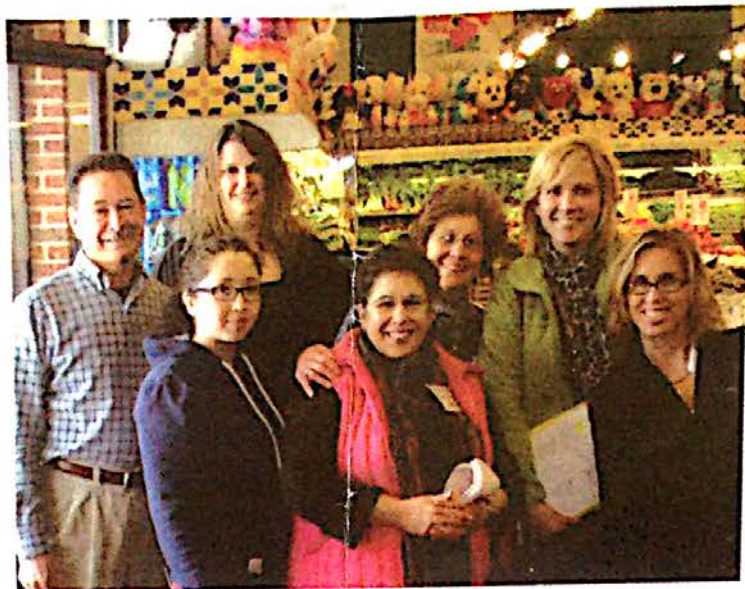
The official name of Linda Yellin's sightseeing company is Feet on the Street Tours, but after six bustling years of business, she's ready to simplify.

Enjoy the D is how Yellin describes her tour company now — short, sweet and to a T. Each time she heads out with a group, whether they're seniors from Southfield or staffers from Wayne State, her goal is to help them fall in love with the city that captured her own heart long ago.

A WSU-educated social worker by trade, Yellin approaches tour directing at a deeper level than simply showing off the sights. "We're trying to help bridge the divide that still exists between Detroit and the suburbs," she says. "We're promoting a positive image through cultural tourism and social issues. We showcase the architecture, history, art, music, food and neighborhoods of Detroit by bus, car and foot — and help in our small way with the local economy as well."

Themed tours cover a wide range of venues, complete with detailed information about each spot. Yellin is well-schooled in the city's past and present but calls herself a *funstorian* rather than historian.

During the popular Prohibition and All That Jazz bus tour, she shares stories about Detroit in the 1920s, including Purple Gang lore. One stop is an art gallery that used to be a speakeasy, and the evening ends at a jazz club for a toast to modern Detroit. "People can dress up in period clothing and we award



Hometown tourists of all ages enjoy exploring neighborhoods such as Mexicantown, shown here, led by *funstorian* Linda Yellin (center).

prizes for the best costumes," Yellin says. "The jazz band plays songs from that era. It's a special connection to the time when Detroit was known as the Paris of the Midwest."

Outings can be customized to a group's specifications. For example, birthday and anniversary celebrations often include stops at nostalgic locations. "We get



Linda Yellin launched Feet on the Street Tours in 2007.

a lot of people interested in going back to their old neighborhood, or the place where their parents or grandparents grew up," Yellin says. "They'll give us addresses of houses or schools to drive by. Some buildings are in various stages of decay or

vacancy, some are empty lots. A lot of neighborhoods have taken a hard hit, so we hear expressions of surprise, sadness and regret. But also, by the end of the tour, hope."

That's because Yellin takes care to balance the ruins with the revitalization, "both in structures and in spirit," she says, adding that she likes to take groups to the Motor City Moishe House and other areas where young adults are working together to build vibrant communities.

Scheduled tours also can be tweaked with special interests in mind. "We took a group from Temple Kol Ami on the Detroit Up Close and Personal tour — with a Jewish twist," says Yellin. "We stopped at the Downtown Synagogue and had bagels from some guys who are opening up a new shop in Detroit."

In fact, almost every tour includes a nosh. During the Come Hungry, Leave Happy tour, Yellin leads folks through Eastern Market, strolling from shed to shed, sampling goodies, talking with vendors and enjoying the kind of behind-the-scenes access that Feet on the Street Tours is known for.

On the company's website, feetonthestreettours.com,

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Tour de force

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there are dozens of testimonials, all along the lines of this one from Judy Dunn, auxiliary coordinator for Jewish Senior Life: "What can I say but wow! Linda always comes up with exciting places to see that we never knew existed. Her organization and attention to detail are first-rate."

Helping to make that happen are Yellin's four part-time employees, including an architect who lends her expertise to information-gathering about the city's stunning architecture. Yellin is delighted that her small business has blossomed.

"Obviously there was pent-up interest in the region," she says. "There are people who haven't been on the south side of 12 Mile in years who feel comfortable coming to the city because they're in a guided group. And after they reconnect, they

return. I'll bump into people at Eastern Market who say, 'Remember me? I'm back, and I brought friends!'"

This effort to aid in Detroit's resurgence is one of the reasons the Women of Wayne Alumni Association honored Yellin (Social Work '82, Master of Social Work '83) with a Headliners Award in 2012.

Yellin remains connected to Wayne State through educational outreach. For example, she offers a series of accredited tours covering subjects such as black history, cultural assimilation and food issues in society. This gives social workers an innovative way to earn continuing education credits to maintain their licenses.

"Linda is a role model for social workers who aspire to engage in community revitalization," says Cheryl E. Waites, dean



Feet on the Street groups can be spotted at landmarks far and wide, including New Center's historic Fisher Building.

of the WSU School of Social Work. "She is part of a powerful movement in social entrepreneurship, using savvy business practices to tackle societal problems. Linda is passionate about raising up Detroit, and

her success in parlaying that passion into a profitable business shows the viability of folding social consciousness into a commercial endeavor." ■

Kavanagh is the editor of Wayne State Showcase.

Wayne State University School of Social Work
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Alumna's tour business highlights the promise of Detroit



Linda Yellin (B.S.W., '82; M.S.W., '83) knows that seeing is believing. So when she wants people to believe in Detroit, she shows them Detroit.

Yellin's outside-the-box contribution to the city's revitalization is Feet On The

Street Tours, the business she launched in 2007 to showcase the food, art, architecture, history, music and neighborhoods of Detroit by bus, car and foot. The company's mission is to promote a positive image of the city and the region through cultural tourism and social issues. Tours not only introduce visitors to the city, notes Yellin, but they bridge the gap between the city and suburbs and re-acquaint residents of the region with the cultural, social and economic resources in their own backyard.

Yellin's abilities as a promoter are evident in her success generating publicity about Feet On The Street Tours. Her frequent appearance in the local and regional press impressed the Women of Wayne Alumni Association, which

in April 2012 honored Yellin at its annual Headliners Awards luncheon. The award, which calls attention to the fact that Wayne State women are making a significant mark in society, is given to alumnae whose achievements have made headlines in the media.

Yellin, a clinical social worker credited with some of Southeast Michigan's first-ever pre- and post-adoption counseling services for those touched by adoption, brings the conscience of a social worker to her programs, which highlight local social services, rehabilitation programs, social justice issues, community art projects, and civil rights. One tour examines food and hunger issues with assistance from Eastern Market Corporation and Gleaners Community Food Bank. Another tour leverages the expertise of Southwest Solutions to explore issues unique to a large Hispanic population. Yet another explores Detroit's rich African American history, including visits to sites of urban renewal and the Motown Museum. Given their sociological bent, a number of Feet On The Street's experiential learning bus tours offer Continuing Education Clock Hours for social workers and certified counselors.