

# Town records safekeeping is just one of town clerk's duties

By Sam Bari

Many people are not exactly aware of the duties of the town clerk, says Arlene Petit, Jamestown's town clerk since 1998. Whenever people need help with town matters, they go to their local town hall and the first counter or office they see is the town clerk, who directs them to the correct department.

"That is a large part of the job - helping people," Petit said. "That's what I like to do best, help people keep their affairs in order and feel comfortable about visiting town hall. We are the gatekeepers. The first impression people get of their town administration falls on our shoulders, and we work hard to make a good first impression," she said.

Petit explains her job in simple terms. "The town clerk is the keeper of the records. This office is responsible for recording everything from the census to the history of your house, and the licenses you have for your pets," she said. Her staff prepares and monitors the needed paperwork for probate court as well. After the paperwork is in order, they present it to the Probate Court Judge. "And we keep a history of every probate case and will that come to town hall," she said.

Although the job sounds simple, it is actually quite complex. Most of the records the town clerk's office records, are part of the town's permanent records. "That's why I am so particular about the way the information is recorded. It must be concise, clear, and accurate," she said.

According to Petit, the town re-



Charlie and Arlene Petit

ords go back further than 1678, the year the town was incorporated. "Back then, all records were hand written," she said. "And the handwriting was beautiful. Now we record the records on computer hard drives and back them up on computer disks."

Petit said that she has had all land records microfilmed and is now in the process of microfilming the probate records. "Land and probate are two of the most important permanent records," she said.

However, Petit was quick to say that the Town Council records are equally as important, because the Town Council makes and enacts the laws. "Our Code of Ordinances,

which is voted in at public hearings, goes in the permanent records," the town clerk said. She mentioned that the Town Council records were the most difficult to keep.

When Petit took the job, she installed software that kept more accurate records. Before, the records were stored on floppy disks that can deteriorate, she said. "We're working on transferring the floppies to hard disks now."

Although the early town clerks kept beautifully hand-written records, Petit said that the ink has faded over the years. "And that's too bad, because the handwritten documents are part of the history of the town. That's the way things were

done at the time," she said. "All of the town clerks before me were responsible for the safe-keeping and recording of the history of Jamestown. Passing that responsibility from one town clerk to the next was almost ritualistic," Petit said.

In addition to Petit's title as town clerk, she is also the probate and Town Council clerk. She recognizes her staff for their expertise and dedication. "Without them, the job could not get done," she said. "We have a very good team."

She praised deputy town clerk Kim Turcone, and the Board of Canvassers clerk, Karen Montoya. She said that Heather Lopes was invaluable in fulfilling her duties as assistant to the probate clerk.

"They are all dedicated employees and deserve respect for the excellent performance of their duties," Petit said. "I am sensitive to each of these individuals. Because of them, everybody benefits."

The town clerk's office is responsible for keeping eight separate categories of vital records. The Town Council and Land Evidence records, the Registry of Vital Statistics, the Board of Canvassers and Probate Court records, Business Licenses, Marriage Licenses, and records of Boards and Commissions are all the responsibility of the town clerk's office.

Town Administrator Bruce Keiser said that Petit and her staff do an excellent job. "They are dedicated professionals," Keiser said. "We couldn't function as a town without them."

"If some town clerk looks at the town records a hundred years from

now, I hope that she says, 'Arlene did a good job preserving the history of Jamestown,'" Petit said.

Arlene Petit was born in Pawtucket, where she lived with her parents until she was married at age 21. She is a graduate of Pawtucket High School and she has worked in a variety of business administrative positions.

Petit moved with her family to Jamestown in 1978. Here, she was a teacher's aid at the Lawn Avenue School, managed a real estate office, owned her own clothing store in Wickford for more than three years, and worked as the administrative assistant to the district manager of Fleet Bank. She was promoted to corporate sales and she worked as a team member publishing the Fleet Bank newsletter.

Mary Ann Crawford, the town administrator at the time, interviewed and hired her in 1998. She has been the Jamestown Town Clerk ever since. Petit has seen four administrations and five Town Councils during her tenure.

Arlene has been married to her husband, Charlie Petit, for five years. Together they have nine grandchildren and one great grandchild. Their hobby is working on a garden that encompasses their entire back yard. It boasts a goldfish pond, a bridge, a small picnic table that Charlie built for the grand kids, and too many varieties of flowers to mention.

Arlene and Charlie both love to cook and they enjoy entertaining friends and family at their house on Bryer Avenue.

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