

## Fruitport Leo Club 2024-2025

by Heidi Tice

The Fruitport Leos had a great year. The Fruitport Leos this year participated in Lions Old Fashioned Christmas, The pancake supper, Easter, and Old Fashioned Days kid activities. They made \$1000 at Old Fashioned Day for parking. Thank you to Chris the owner of OddSides Ales, (The new establishment in Fifth Third Bank building). Since the building was under construction, he allowed the Leo's to maintain the parking lot. The monies the Leos collected will be used to purchase Christmas decorations with Fruitport township to hopefully put on the power poles down airline in Christmas of 2026. The club had 10 Seniors graduate and move on this year. Many of them were Leo's since middle school. This year Superintendent Kennedy allowed to let the Leo's wear cords for their service to the community. The cords are burgundy and silver. Burgundy is for Lions Internal Leo Clubs and Silver is for Community service. Pictured (right) is Leo Grace Oleen proudly displaying her cords at graduation. The club began in September with only 4 members; however, they are growing each week. If you are in grades 6-12 and would like to help out in your community call phone numbers for either Bob Jados or Heidi Tice (231) 286-9120 or (231) 578-6500 respectively. We serve our community.



## Five Generations in Fruitport: On Immigration, Family, and Myths

By Tiffany Dupont Novak

My father's grandparents immigrated to the United States from Hungary in the early to mid-1900s. Like many families at the time, they fled the country, fearing the impending German occupation. They first made their way to Chicago, and the story goes, my great-grandfather traded the family home there for a home and plot of land in Fruitport. So, the family made their way north. They built homes, had children, made beautiful memories, and now, five generations later, my husband and I are raising our child in Fruitport.

My mother's father served in the United States Air Force and met my grandmother overseas. My mother's family made their way to the U.S. when she was nine years-old. So, like every American, immigration is a part of my family's story.

When I saw the violence and terror inflicted during the late January ICE raids in Minneapolis, which drastically impacted both citizens and non-citizens, I questioned the official claim that these operations were to protect Americans from criminals. My family is not undocumented, but we're not far from being immigrants ourselves. The reason for moving to the United States was not to commit a crime but to seek a better life and future for our family.

Raquel B. DeGarmo, Executive Director of the Immigrant Assistance Center of West Michigan, or IAC, says seeing the positive change immigration can bring for families is what drives her. According to DeGarmo, 100% of her clients have made their way to the United States for better work opportunities. "They are some of the hardest working people, and they just want a better life for their families," she says.

As Executive Director of the IAC and an Accredited Representative of the Department of Justice, DeGarmo supports individuals and families seeking to become Lawful Permanent Residents, which is a complicated and lengthy process. She has been engaged in this work for more than 13 years. According to DeGarmo, visas are incredibly limited, as highlighted by a 2023 report by the Department of State. From November 2022 to November 2023, only about 1 in 28 immigrant visa applicants, roughly 141,000 out of nearly 3.9 million, were able to get their visas processed before the annual cap was reached.

Dangerous circumstances at home often place urgency on families to make their way to the United States rather than wait for a process that could take decades. "I'm a mother, I would give my life for my children, and here, you have mothers walking hundreds of miles to get their children to a better life. They are fleeing

from something worse. I can't comprehend how people don't see that humanity," says DeGarmo.

Much of the national conversation around immigration centers on the idea that many of the individuals who choose to flee to the U.S. without completing the immigration process are dangerous criminals, when data distributed by the federal government itself says otherwise.

Looking at 2025 data from the U.S. Customs and Border Protection, about .0005% of immigrants who are undocumented—roughly 8,000—had any criminal conviction whatsoever before entering the United States. Of that group, 60% were convicted only of "Illegal Entry, Re-Entry" (crossing the border itself) and no other crimes. In comparison, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures, approximately 77,000,000 Americans, or 1 in every 3 adult U.S. citizens, have a criminal record.

"I feel blessed to do what I'm doing and to have the clients that we have," says DeGarmo of her work supporting families through the process of immigrating to the United States at the IAC. "This has been an amazing journey that has far exceeded my expectations, and I feel so grateful for my community and ethnicity. I can pay homage to my parents and great grandparents; they deserved the American Dream."

I imagine what might have happened when my family immigrated to the United States, if somehow their papers weren't in order, or they hadn't made it fully through the process of citizenship, when someone came knocking at their door, threw them in an unmarked car, and sent them to prison. Instead, in a sea of nationalities making their way to the U.S. seeking a better future, my ancestors were welcomed and made a life for us in Fruitport. Now, five generations later, we have the privilege of celebrating this place as our home.

The story of America has always been written by those who dared to seek something better: the Hungarian carpenter, the military family, the mother walking hundreds of miles for her children's future. To oppose that story now is not to protect America, but to forget what made it worth coming to in the first place.



Tiffany Dupont Novak

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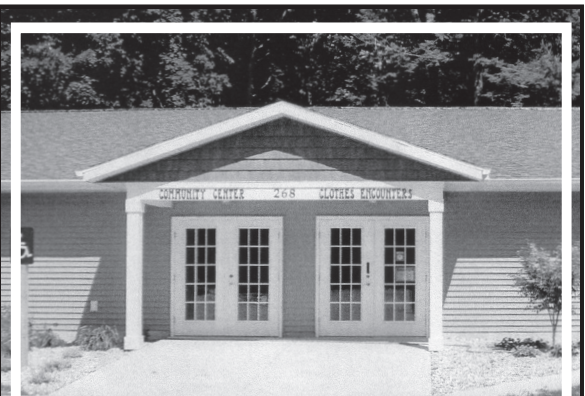
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Sat: 10am-1pm

**268 N. 3rd Ave. Fruitport Village  
Next to Word of Hope Church**