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## **LOCAL COLOR**

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Minding her manners

**Suzanne Willis** learned much more from her grandmother than which fork to use - she learned that having good manners means always doing your best and being nice to people.

By KAREN FELDMAN [kfeldman@news-press.com](mailto:kfeldman@news-press.com)

**Suzanne Willis** fondly recalls learning good manners under the gentle tutelage of her grandmother, Florence Larimer Black.

At age 11, **Willis** spent three weeks touring the castles and gardens of the British Isles with Black, aka Mimi.

"Everywhere we went we had tea in the afternoon," says **Willis**, 36. "That's when she taught me the proper way to drink English tea."

Black, who lived next door to **Willis** on Sandra Drive in Fort Myers, devoted a lot of time to instilling good manners in her children and grandchildren.

From those lessons, **Willis** developed "Mimi's Manners," an etiquette class for children that she teaches at The Ritz-Carlton, Naples, where she's the director of public relations.

About once a month, **Willis** conducts a two-hour class for children ages 6 through 11 years in a lush private dining room.

Over a three-course dinner, participants learn how to work their way through a plethora of silverware, the correct methods of cutting and chewing their food, how to keep their elbows off the table and what topics are appropriate for dinner conversation.

**Willis** got the idea for the class in 1999, when her beloved 88-year-old grandmother appeared close to death.

"I didn't want there to be a funeral program that just had when she was born, when she died and the 'Lord's Prayer'," she says. "I wanted something that says what she meant to us."

She asked her mother, sister, uncle and cousins what they'd learned from Black's life. They all recalled her lessons in good manners.

"Mimi instilled in us that we should always do our best," she says. "I decided to put all of that into a book."

Margie **Willis**, **Suzanne**'s mother, has similar recollections of her mother's passion for manners.

"It was one of the things she was always particular about," says Margie **Willis**. "She

wasn't very strict at it but she reminded you if you weren't doing something correctly."

**Suzanne Willis** says, "She was very subtle. She'd say, 'This is the right way to do this.' She made it fun."

As it turned out, Black's lessons were a godsend to her children and grandchildren, all of whom became members of the Edisonia royal court.

**Margie Willis, Suzanne**, her sister and cousin were crowned queen in the Edison Pageant of Light, Fort Myers' version of cotillion. **Margie Willis'** brother and nephew were crowned king.

Black made sure her progeny were well-prepared for their reigns.

"She'd teach us how to do parties, how to make sandwiches, how to decorate, how to do flower arrangements," **Margie Willis** says.

Today, Black is 92 and lives at Calusa Harbour retirement community in Fort Myers. Her failing health prevents her from attending **Willis'** classes, but her granddaughter takes comfort in the knowledge that she's passing on her grandmother's legacy, which includes more than mere manners.

"She instilled in us that you should always do your best, always be polite, always be nice to people no matter what."

#### PHOTO CAPTIONS

**Suzanne Willis** demonstrates the proper way to wipe one's mouth during a formal dinner. It's one of many tips **Willis** shares as she teaches "Mimi's Manners," a class for children ages 6 to 11 at The Ritz-Carlton, Naples. GARTH FRANCIS/ The News-Press

**Suzanne Willis** (rear) and her mother **Margie Willis** (front) are well-versed in manners, thanks to Florence Larimer Black, Margie's mom. GARTH FRANCIS/ The News-Press