



BARRY SLOAN

Children's book author Debra Scala Giokas has been visiting presidential museums, Long Island libraries and historical groups to talk about "Ladies, First: Common Threads."

# First ladies get their due

Championing the presidents' wives for their talents, quirks and needlework

BY ELLEN YAN  
Special to Newsday

**A**n ardent crocheter, Debra Scala Giokas yearned to tell yarns about the nation's first ladies, how they stitched together an army of wartime knitters, built the West Wing, held parties with oyster ice cream and shared needlework patterns with the public.

For the past year, she's been making the rounds of presidential museums, Long Island libraries and historical groups to talk about her children's book, "Ladies, First: Common Threads," published last June 2. The book features spouses' needlework skills — 18 first ladies before Michelle Obama — but is primarily about their lives, from childhood to beyond the Oval Office.

"Your image of Martha Washington — is it probably an older woman in a mop hat?" the author asked during a recent talk at a luncheon hosted by the American Association of University Women at the Irish Coffee Pub in East Islip. "I want you to think of Martha Washington as a 19-year-old woman who married the wealthiest man in Virginia and had four children.

She was a widow by the time she was 26."

And that was all before she married George Washington and made quilts out of scrap fabric (including her husband's old clothing), and created master-level embroidery of birds and flowers on a pin cushion, the author told attendees.

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# Beyond Dolley's ice cream

FIRST LADIES from E13

It's been a justice-for-first-ladies journey for Scala Giokas, 57, of Sayville, as she has educated herself about presidential spouses, publicized their accomplishments and also learned something about her own path in life.

Scala Giokas got hooked first by Ida McKinley, wife of William McKinley, the 25th president. In a 2014 episode of "Pawn Stars," the show about a Las Vegas pawnshop, she heard the business was going to sell the first lady's tiara, which features a diamond-encrusted wing design.

Her curiosity piqued, she later learned that the McKinley Presidential Library & Museum, in Canton, Ohio, bought it for \$43,000. Nearby, Scala Giokas discovered, Ida McKinley's ancestral home is part of the First Ladies National Historic Site, a library and museum that she said was most helpful to her research.

Learning about the first ladies was something new, the author said, noting that history is largely written by men.

## UNRAVELING THEIR TALES

The marketing director for a Long Island law firm, Scala Giokas began in 2018 to pore over newspaper articles, memoirs and letters, digging online and interviewing experts and curators by phone for her book after taking a children's book writing course.

"When I was in elementary school, we didn't cover the first ladies in our curriculum — only that Martha Washington was grandmotherly and Dolley Madison served ice cream," Scala Giokas writes in her book, which aims to bring the first ladies to a younger audience.

For example, she never knew that Lou Henry Hoover, born in 1874 and so named because her father wanted a son, was the first female student at Stanford University, where she met future husband, Herbert Hoover. She was also the first woman to earn a geology degree and the first presidential spouse to broadcast radio addresses, the author writes. As for her needlework, a photo in the book



The author gives a talk during a March lunch hosted by the American Association of University Women at the Irish Coffee Pub in East Islip.

**“Instead of focusing on what they wore, what about what they made?” — Author Debra Scala Giokas**

shows Lou Henry Hoover's framed 1932 cross-stitched depiction of the Washington Monument against blue-gray skies.

"Women took the step behind the men," said Scala Giokas. "They didn't really promote themselves."

To the author, Grace Coolidge should be recognized as needlework artisan. Coolidge crocheted a white blanket in 1927 for the White House's Lincoln Bedroom, designing down the center the Liberty Bell, an eagle and the nation's de facto motto, *E pluribus unum*, Latin for "out of many, one."

But she and husband, Calvin,

were better known in their time as animal lovers, according to her book. When someone sent them a raccoon — considered a delicacy in that era — the couple added Rebecca the Raccoon to their pet menagerie, nicknamed the Pennsylvania Avenue Zoo, which included a donkey, Pekin ducks and mockingbird among the more unusual pets.

The wife of James Madison, Dolley, didn't just help save George Washington's portrait before the British burned the White House in 1814, she refused to leave the capital when the British plotted to kidnap her, Scala Giokas writes. This first lady, who had loved oyster

ice cream and parties, helped rebuild the capital and set up an orphanage. Photos in the book show the baby caps Madison made for orphans and friends of yarn, ribbons and cloth, with detailed floral designs.

Edith Roosevelt cross-stitched a colorful sampler of the important events in the life of her husband, Theodore. The sampler includes family figures and depictions of his Army career along with the letters "VP," for vice presidency, and three uniformed figures saluting a U.S. flag. She was the first lady who had the idea to build the West Wing and the First Ladies National

Portrait Gallery in the White House basement.

Ida McKinley crocheted 4,000 pairs of slippers with leather soles to donate to orphans, veterans, even strangers — and anyone who wanted a pair. Scala Giokas describes how she crocheted one slipper to look like one of McKinley's — and it took her four hours.

"You think of them only in the context of history and in the context of their husbands' accomplishments," Susan Furfaro, 75, of Oakdale, past president of the American Association of University Women's Islip branch, told Newsday after the talk. "This





The children's book focuses on 18 first ladies who brought their needlework skills to the White House. Debra Scala Giokas crocheted a slipper, above, inspired by Ida McKinley's. Below, the author's stock of yarn.



made them more like real people doing real things."

#### HER PERSONAL THREAD

Growing up in Astoria, Queens, Scala Giokas learned crocheting at age 7 from her maternal grandmother, Delorise Manzelli, and knitting from her paternal grandmother, Rose Scala.

The little girl never got on with knitting, which requires two needles, because she found it was hard to correct mistakes. Crocheting requires one needle, Scala Giokas says, and is forgiving.

As she found other interests, Scala Giokas wondered whether needlework was an

older person's hobby. She left it for decades, until her husband, George Giokas, paid for a one-year master class on crocheting in 2012 — and she fell in love with the yarn.

A year after her crochet master class, Scala Giokas took a children's book writing class but was stumped for a writing topic.

But she said she found her answer by connecting the dots in her life.

A news article on American fashion designer Claire McCardell inspired her to write her first book, "Claire," self-published in 2021, and when she started the first ladies endeavor, she realized she had

always read biographies of women — Lucille Ball, Maya Angelou and Helen Keller among them.

"I was thinking about writing fiction, but really I should have been thinking about writing nonfiction about women," Scala Giokas said.

#### FAVORITE FIRST LADY

When Scala Giokas opens up about her favorite first lady, a bit of teary emotion can be heard in her voice.

It's Eleanor Roosevelt, who carried her knitting bag everywhere and lived what she advocated, a life of purpose, the author said.

The wife of Franklin D. Roosevelt was dubbed First Knitter of the Land because she challenged the public to knit a million sweaters for soldiers and sailors during World War II, according to the book. As the country was drawn into the war, women and men could be seen knitting in movie theaters, hospitals and factories during their work breaks.

"I hear her talking in my head," Scala Giokas said of how Eleanor Roosevelt has stayed with her. "If I have a tough time with something, I hear her say to me 'You must do the thing you think you cannot do.'" She embraces the message of Eleanor Roosevelt's life — to have purpose.

For Scala Giokas, crocheting

dolls is her way of helping charities raise money and making others happy.

For the past 10 years or so, she's been making them to donate to children, charities and senior citizens. A little girl whose Marine father was deployed, for example, got a doll wearing a dress and officer's cap in blue-and-white. Save the Children had a 1950s-themed benefit, so its doll wore a poodle skirt. To raise funds for the Sayville Chamber of Commerce during the pandemic, she crocheted Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders in his iconic crossed-arm pose with mittens and mask freezing outside during Joe Biden's 2021 inauguration.

Scala Giokas' dolls started as a way to deal with the death of her father, Ronald Scala, from a rare blood cancer in 2015. She crocheted one for the daughter of her father's nurse as a thank-you. At the same time, she found the needlework helped calm her.

"It was cathartic," Scala Giokas said.

Now, after every big project or heavy times, Scala Giokas finds she can unwind with crochet. During the pandemic, she asked relatives and friends for their favorite colors and passions so she could create a square for each — 144 of them — and sewed them together into a we're-all-in-this-together blanket. It's on the chaise

longue in her home office.

When she gave a first ladies Zoom talk for the West Babylon library in late March, Scala Giokas showed a crocheted doll in a green dress and explained she would never part with it — it was made for her by her grandmother.

"Why it survives is because of the personal touch," attendee Lillian Sabia, 72, of Roosevelt, founder of Loving Hands Knit and Crochet for Charities, said after the talk. "What's better than a homemade gift?"

Scala Giokas understands. Her grandmothers died within 12 days of each other in 2004, and she appreciates the blankets she got from them: "They're like virtual hugs."

The thread of her life, from her grandmothers to the first ladies, has taken her to blogging, fiber art and new friends, even abroad. In England, she has a seamstress pen pal who's a fan of first lady Abigail Adams; during Christmas, Scala Giokas mailed her an Adams ornament and received a Queen Elizabeth II ornament in return.

"It takes a lifetime to find your voice," Scala Giokas said of her later-in-life avocation. "We can't know it in the beginning — that would take the surprise out of it. It makes it a more beautiful experience to have the patience and to start putting it together."



Debra Scala Giokas signs her book "Ladies, First: Common Threads" during a book luncheon recently in East Islip.

## FOLLOW THE THREAD

Debra Scala Giokas will talk about her book, "Ladies, First: Common Threads," on May 10 at 6:30 p.m. at Patchogue-Medford Public Library, 54-60 E. Main St, Patchogue, 631-654-4700, visit [pmlib.libnet.info/event/7759448](http://pmlib.libnet.info/event/7759448) to register for the in-person or Zoom event, and June 22 at 7 p.m. at Connetquot Public Library, 760 Ocean Ave., Bohemia, 631-567-5079 [connetquotlibrary.org](http://connetquotlibrary.org).