

SEPTEMBER 2020

# VillageNeighbors

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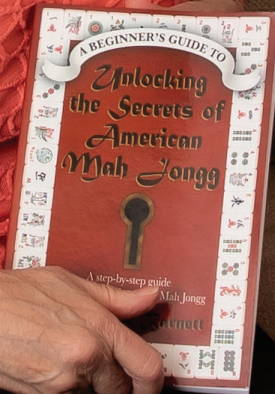
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## *Meet Debbie Barnett*

Taking her passion for  
playing Mah Jongg to  
the next level



Best Version Media





By Denise Lasley

Photos by Rose Day Photography

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## MEET DEBBIE BARNETT

### Taking her passion for playing Mah Jongg to the next level

**"Some clouds have a silver lining," says Debbie Barnett, Villages resident. Not the way many people have been describing the need to isolate due to the Covid 19 outbreak. But let's start at the beginning...**

#### MEET DEBBIE BARNETT

Debbie Barnett describes herself as an entrepreneur who has always turned to her talents or her love of a process when thinking about her next business venture. For example, as a young woman she headed a successful business making and selling hand-knitted children's clothing. She spent 26 years working in various aspects of the insurance industry. And she has been a real estate investor. "I love creating. And I love

teaching. Training and teaching other people to succeed is the best feeling," Debbie declares passionately.

Meeting Debbie was such a pleasure. Her passion for life really shines through as she talks about her life, her career, her family (especially her grandchildren), her writing, and her latest project: *The American School of Mah Jongg*.

*The American School of Mah Jongg* ([www.mahjongteacher.com](http://www.mahjongteacher.com)) is an on-line, interactive, classroom-style learning school that Debbie created to fill a perceived need. Her love of Mah Jongg started when she was in her late 20's, watching her Mom play. I remember being fascinated by Mah Jongg as well, hovering over the table to watch when it was my Mom's turn to host her weekly game at our house. There was something so mesmerizing about the







clacking sound the “ivory” tiles made as the ladies shuffled them around in the center of the table. My Mom and her friends even taught me a few of the basics so I could fill in for someone who was running late. But I never developed a true love for the game. Not like Debbie.

Debbie has been playing Mah Jongg for over 45 years. It started with organizing a game for some of the younger women in her hometown in East Haven, CT. When she moved to South Florida in the late 1980’s she started various Mah Jongg groups, even organizing fundraisers around games of Mah Jongg. In 2006, Debbie decided to share her passion for the game by teaching, “advertising” on some social media sites for students. Through word of mouth, Debbie developed quite a clientele. And that

led to writing a book, *Unlocking the Secrets of American Mah Jongg*, a step-by-step, illustrated guide on how to play American Mah Jongg. “There were some books out there,” says Debbie, “but they weren’t very up-to-date.” Debbie is already editing her next version of this informative book. You can learn more at [www.debbiebarnettauthor.com](http://www.debbiebarnettauthor.com).

## THE SCHOOL OF AMERICAN MAH JONGG

Now Debbie has upped her game — so to speak — again! In January, 2020, Debbie launched the first ever virtual and interactive *School of American Mah Jongg*, with a variety of courses geared to all levels of players, from beginners to those who want to learn advanced strategies. I had the opportunity to watch as Debbie worked through a “game” with some students. The classroom environment is very user friendly and really does mimic a “real game” experience. The best part is that

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## COVER *FEATURE*

Debbie can control each hand, so when it is your turn to play, if you start to play a tile that is not the best choice, Debbie can take control of your hand and show you the better, more strategic move. Through the miracle of computer programming, only you get to see her suggestions, while the other players contemplate their next move. And so the game continues on, with all the players getting individual attention from the teacher.

Each course covers a variety of topics. For example, the *Beginner Course* is made up of four, 2-hours classes for up to four students, covering such themes as:

- A brief History of Mah Jongg
- Learning your set
- Learning your tiles
- Terminology
- Dragon Partnerships
- Understanding the card
- Introduction to the Charleston
- Setting up the game
- Forming Hands
- Calling Tiles
- Joker Exchanges
- Intro to some strategies

Each class also includes actual game play so you can practice what you have learned.

The *Advanced Strategies* class is a private, 2-hour session that covers all aspects of defensive and offensive play to help players improve their technique. Debbie also offers a private beginners course and an intermediate course.

"Since launching in January, the school has really gained in popularity," says Debbie. "My site launched at a good time. With the restrictions placed on socializing because of Covid 19, a lot of people have turned to on-line learning. I have couples who sign up together, I had a mother sign up with her three daughters so they could have an activity to share during

their isolation, and some advanced players with time on their hands now who signed up to take the advanced strategies class to help improve their game. Who would have thought that something like the outbreak of a virus would help my new project grow so quickly? I guess some clouds really do have a silver lining."

Debbie also offers mentorship to all her students through her *Facebook* group: *Ask The Mah Jongg Teacher*. Debbie organized this site to answer Mah Jongg questions from beginners to the most advanced players. She also posts tips and strategies to help you improve your game. "I have developed my own teaching style," writes Debbie. "Some terms and answers may be specific to my approach to teaching. I will never profess to knowing all the answers but if I don't know, I will research the answer for you and provide you with as accurate an explanation as possible."

And never one to let the grass grow under her feet, Debbie is now partnering with another well-known Mah Jongg teacher to develop plans for a national Mah Jongg event and even more classes. "Over the years, my business career has been the glue that has held me together, and seen me through the good times and the bad." Debbie plans to share her life and times in her new memoir, slated to go to print soon. Looks like Debbie's entrepreneurial endeavors have not yet come to an end. ■



## HISTORY OF MAH JONGG

The game of Mah Jongg has been around in one form or another for almost one hundred and fifty years. It is believed to have started in China, based on a money-based system of characters carved into tiles. For example, the Dots or circles represent coins, Bamboos (referred to as Bam) represent strings of coins, and Craks represent 10,000 coins.

Foreigners living in China often observed the game being played. Joseph P. Babcock is thought to have brought the game to America in the early 1920's. He came up with the name *Mah Jongg*, and added the Western numbers and letters to the tiles. He co-founded the *Mah-Jongg Sales Company of America*, and began importing these new Mah Jongg sets to the US.

In most variations of the game, each player begins with 13 tiles and in turn draws and discards tiles until one player forms a "legal" hand. The game is based on a standard set of hands against which all games are played. Those hands change annually when the *National Mah Jongg League* issues their new card.

There are basic rules about how to draw a tile, how a tile can be taken from another player, what kinds of combinations can be made and played, and various other rules of play. But it's wise to familiarize yourself with the many regional variations to the rules before starting a game with a new group of players.