



West Mt. Airy Neighbors
6703 Germantown Avenue, Suite 200
Philadelphia, PA 19119
215-438-6022 fax 215-844-9167
E-mail: wman@wman.net
www.wman.net

WMAN NEWS

DECEMBER 2009

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WHERE WEST MT. AIRY NEIGHBORS IS NOW – A SNAPSHOT OF OUR COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION AT 50



Photo: Mia Mengucci



A great place for children to grow up
Welcome to Mt. Airy brochure, 1976

Members of the WMAN Streetscapes Committee, with the help of local Girl Scouts, participate in a tree planting on November 21, 2009. Seated (l to r): Jill Wolfe, David Tukey, Mia Mengucci. Standing (l to r): Siena Childs, Shalab Ahmad, Hunter Baylor, Lisa Winder, Seane Baylor

Plan the Work & Work the Plan

WMAN's strategic planning process, supported by The Philadelphia Foundation, drew in hundreds of community residents to share their dreams for the neighborhood and their insights into how WMAN can assist in bringing those dreams to fruition. We now work from a set of goals that reflects what our neighbors want WMAN to be.

Strength from Within

WMAN enjoys a diverse, hard-working and dedicated Board with an active Nominating Committee; we are committed to careful stewardship of our resources and to financial transparency; and we consistently focus on the accountability required by our not-for-profit status. These attributes keep us strong from within.

Our Staff Capacity Has Increased

In the last two years, our staff has doubled with the addition of Alexandra Morigi, Communications and Marketing Coordinator, and Milt Cohen, Community Relations Specialist. We now have staff people who have special responsibility and expertise in areas that are essential to our strategic goals.

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WMAN BOARD
OF DIRECTORS

MT. AIRY GATEWAY
PROJECT

PRESIDENT'S PAGE

Photo: Nancy Peter



Since its inception fifty years ago, WMAN has sought to keep its finger on the pulse of West Mt. Airy and to meet the needs of the community. Whether it is trying to create and sustain a racially integrated community, addressing issues by individual residents, rehabbing green spaces, increasing the tree canopy, partaking in efforts to resolve zoning issues, keeping residents informed of local news, or organizing meetings around community concerns, WMAN has

taken action. For a quick glimpse of our endeavors, read our cover story, "Where West Mt. Airy Neighbors is Now – A Snapshot of Our Community Organization at 50."

This has not been a solo journey. We have been fortunate to have your ongoing support through volunteerism and financial contributions. Your generosity has allowed us to carry out our commitment to preserve and enhance the quality of life in our richly diverse, urban neighborhood.

Our Annual Giving Campaign is now under way. Your donations are crucial to our day-to-day activities and help us make our community a better place for all to live.

Please use the Annual Giving coupon below and send in your donation today. You can also visit www.wman.net/supportwman.htm and make an online donation. We truly appreciate your support and look forward to working with you in the year ahead. Thank you.

Kevin A. Peter
President

As some of you may know, after five years as WMAN's Executive Director and 15 years as a WMAN volunteer (mostly as a board member), Laura Morris Siena is pursuing new endeavors. We'd like to thank Laura for her years of dedication and numerous accomplishments during her tenure with WMAN.

Photo: Peter O. Macoretta



We'd also like to introduce and welcome Lizabeth B. Macoretta, WMAN's new Executive Director. Lizabeth has lived in Mt. Airy for eight years and brings

many skills to the Executive Director position. She has been on board at WMAN since October 26 and has already hit the ground running.

The success of WMAN depends on your participation and your financial contributions. We welcome your involvement!

I'm enclosing my Annual Giving contribution of:

- \$30 \$50 \$100 \$125
- \$250 \$500 \$1,000 \$_____
- I'm interested in volunteering with WMAN.
- Please add my email address to your eCommunications distribution list.

In addition to my money, I would like to help my community in the following ways:

- Mt. Airy Day Block Captains/Virtual Block Captains
- Membership WMAN's 50th Anniversary Celebration
- Office Projects/Mailings Fund Raising/Development
- Other _____

Please use this coupon to send your Annual Giving contribution to WMAN at

6703 Germantown Avenue, Suite 200
Philadelphia, PA 19119. Or, visit www.wman.net and use our secure server to make your contribution online. Thank you!

Please make check or money order payable to WMAN. Your contribution is tax-deductible.

The official registration and financial information of West Mt. Airy Neighbors may be obtained from the Pennsylvania Department of State by calling toll-free, within Pennsylvania, 1-800-732-0999. Registration does not imply endorsement.

Please sign me up for:

- eCommunications
 - Mt. Airy Safety Network Alerts
- (We must have your email address if you wish to receive these communications.)

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We Are Structured to Seek Out Residents' Concerns and Respond

WMAN's Quality of Life and Zoning Committees, our membership in a wide variety of neighborhood listservs, our keeping up with what's being discussed on blogs, and responding to residents' emails and phone calls – all provide us with constant feedback on our neighbors' concerns.

We Value Volunteers' Ideas and Energy

Several of the most successful initiatives of the last few years – the refurbishment of the Allens Lane/Lincoln Drive intersection; the planting of 184 street trees; the revitalization of Ned Wolf Park; the clean-up and planting at Emlen Circle; and the restoration of the pergolas at the Lincoln Drive/Johnson Street intersection which is just getting underway – came directly from neighbors who had a great idea and came to WMAN. We provide an organizational home and make it possible for those dedicated community members to bring their ideas to life. These neighbors then recruit more volunteers who bring their own energy, networks and skills to the projects, with extraordinary results.

We Work Hard on Partnerships

Whether it's with our sister organization, East Mt. Airy Neighbors; our elected officials; large community institutions such as New Covenant Campus and The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia; conservation groups like Friends of the Wissahickon and Friends of Carpenter's Woods; Town Watches, block captains or *ad hoc* groups focused on a specific issue, we strive for productive relationships – all with the goal of yielding community problem-solving results for our residents.

We are Wired

While we treasure our in-person contacts with neighbors, we are also committed to communicating what is going on at WMAN and in our community through electronic and printed communications. Our eNewsletter, Mt. Airy Safety Network Alerts, website, *WMAN News*, and presence on blogs ensure that we stay in touch with neighbors. Forwarded emails and Safety Alerts fill in the gaps, keeping a large section of residents in the know.



Photo: Laura Morris Siena



Photo: Alexandra Morigi



Photo: Allyson Katzman Bormack



Photo: Michelle DuSold

- 1. Volunteers at the April 2009 Streetscapes Committee Cleanup (l to r): Maryanne Bowers, Damaris South, and Sharon Corbin
- 2. Ned Wolf Park
- 3. Clean-up and Planting at Emlen Circle, Russell Carter
- 4. Mt. Airy Gateway Project Gets Some Help from Volunteers (l to r): Lois Frischling, Tom Schoonmaker, Robin Nourie, Joe Jennings

Photo: George Bacon Wood
Courtesy of the Chestnut Hill Historical Society



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We Win Some & We Lose Some

We supported the nomination of the architecturally-significant and historic Garrett Dunn property at 7048 Germantown Avenue to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. Once the nomination was approved, we worked closely with the developer and the neighbors to ensure that the development plan honored the historic structures, met the highest standards for urban design, and was aesthetically pleasing. Then, the developer went bankrupt, and finally, the *coup de grace*, the house was struck by lightning in August and burned to the ground. But we learned, in this case and others, that we can have a real impact on development plans in our neighborhood, and that we have strong partners in valuing our community's older and historic buildings.

Photo: Lawrence D. McEwen, AIA



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We Like to Have Fun! (at least once in awhile!)

Eat Your Heart Out!, our annual signature fund raising event, is also a great way for neighbors to meet each other over delicious food at great West Mt. Airy houses. We love seeing new friendships blossom and proving to the world that we can have a good time!

Photo: Laura Morris Siena



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Photo: Sara Allen



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Photo: Jonna's Picture This

- 5. Garrett Dunn House (before)
- 6. Garrett Dunn House (after)
- 7. 2009 Philly Spring Cleanup
(l to r): Bob Elfant and Andrea Rinaldi
- 8. April 2009 Tree Planting by the Streetscapes Committee
(l to r): Carol Graeber, Philip Seitz, and Kristi Fox
- 9. Eat Your Heart Out! 2009
(l to r): Beth Ounsworth, Laura Siena, Ron Siena, Mary Kurtz and Steve Kurtz
- 10. Eat Your Heart Out! 2009
Dawn Frisby-Byers, Marion Taylor, Jarma Frisby
- 11. Eat Your Heart Out! 2009
(l to r): Gina Smith and Annette McDaniel-Turner



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Photo: Jonna's Picture This



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Photo: Jonna's Picture This

FAREWELL: A LOVE LETTER

Note: The Board and staff of WMAN, and the Editor of this publication, were kind to let me have a few parting comments.
Laura Morris Siena

Leaving WMAN

This fall, I wrapped up an involvement – one could more accurately say a love affair – with West Mt. Airy Neighbors (WMAN) which has lasted, with a few interruptions for child-rearing, since 1989.

I joined the Board of West Mt. Airy Neighbors pretty much by accident: WMAN's President at the time, Steve Bartlett, lived down the street, and he and another neighbor-Board member, Beth Ounsworth, recruited me. I got my feet wet by serving as chair of the annual Mt. Airy Day in 1990.

While my getting involved with WMAN was serendipitous, I came to live in West Mt. Airy very much on purpose. My husband and I were looking to move out of our small apartment in New York City and start a family. A visiting high school friend told us about a racially integrated neighborhood in Philadelphia (he lived on the unit block of West Mt. Airy Avenue). My immediate thought was, "I *have* to live there!" Luckily, my dear husband was amenable.

That day, living here felt like a calling. It still does.

The Shoulders We Stand On

Recently, Shirley Melvin died. Shirley was one of "the twins" of Twin Realty. She and her identical twin Doris Polsky, who still lives in West Mt. Airy, were two of the heroes of Mt. Airy's integration story. When Shirley and Doris moved here just after World War II, many residents' house deeds still stipulated "No Jews or Negroes". In fact, the Supreme Court only declared these kinds of restrictive covenants unconstitutional two years later -- in 1948. As Jews, and as young women who cared about social justice, Shirley and Doris keenly felt not only their own exclusion (their father had purchased a home in West Philadelphia into which he was unable to move his family because of anti-Semitic sentiment), but also the exclusion of others. They became part of a group of activist leaders who did something which had never been done before in the history of this nation – they created an intentionally integrated community.



The Mothers – and Fathers – of Invention

Today, with an African American president, African American chief executives of Fortune 500 companies, and with the rise of people of color in many areas of economic and civic leadership, it is easy to forget how recently the ground was laid by courageous people who fought the large and small battles of the civil rights movement. It's also easy to forget how ingrained the patterns of wholesale racial change were in communities across the United States, particularly in the Northeast and Midwest.

And, finally, it's easy to forget that residential racial segregation itself was the product of institutional arrangements created by our federal government and sustained by the business practices of lenders and real estate agents. The federal Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) promoted amortized mortgages with regular payments enabling a whole new group of Americans to become homeowners. At the same time, the HOLC "redlined" neighborhoods with minority populations, as well as nearby neighborhoods, marking them as unfit for residential mortgages or commercial investment. The banks followed the federal government's lead in establishing their own lending practices. Unscrupulous realtors were allowed to engage in block-busting and encourage panic selling.

So, in the postwar era, it was taken as a given that, if African American people began to move into a formerly all-White community, Whites would flee to the suburbs (where new highways and new homes with affordable mortgages awaited them -- for Whites only). To expect a community's racial make-up to change soon after the first Black families arrived was as natural as to look at the sky on a sunny day and assume it would be blue.

It was against this backdrop that the heroism of the activists who worked to create a different reality here in Mt. Airy becomes clear. The religious congregations came together first, with Church of the Epiphany, the Unitarian Church of Germantown and Germantown Jewish Centre co-signing a

covenant in 1953 which said, in effect, "There are new people moving into our community who do not look like us. We want to welcome them, and we also want to stay." Rabbi Elias Charry of Germantown Jewish Centre was particularly active in subsequent years in integration efforts.

The same year, George Schermer came to Philadelphia from Detroit to head up the newly-formed Commission on Human Relations. Schermer chose to live in Mt. Airy and began to work with others to create an intentionally integrated community. West Mt. Airy Neighbors grew out of those efforts, and was incorporated fifty years ago, in 1959.

Schermer and the many volunteers – African American and White – who ultimately worked on this initiative developed both a clear-eyed understanding of the ways in which segregation was promoted in the housing market. Then, they created tactics to combat them. The tactics they invented were emulated in later efforts in Shaker Heights, Ohio, Oak Park, Illinois, and other communities in the 1960s and 1970s, and are being used in South Orange, Maplewood and Pennsauken, New Jersey even today. These included fighting block-busting efforts by realtors, getting City Council to pass an ordinance barring "SOLD" signs, going door-to-door to encourage White residents not to move, creating mixed race panels of women

who would speak together on the benefits of racial integration, and reaching out to large employers such as University of Pennsylvania to encourage newly-recruited employees to move to the community. Some volunteers are happily still with us, like Sylvia Carter and Doris Polsky, but many, like Don Black and Shirley Melvin, are gone.

The result of their efforts, while not perfect, is still remarkable – a community with approximately 50/50 African American/White population over four census periods. (There are more Asians and Latinos here than there used to be, but Mt. Airy's story continues to be one of Black/White integration).

Their Vision – Our Legacy

I am absolutely convinced that there is a certain something in the air in this neighborhood – something which makes it a special place to live. I believe it is the unseen, but strongly felt, vestiges of the determination and hard work of these visionaries over many years, along with their creativity in responding to the challenge.

Just as many people report feeling the powerful presence of the dead when they visit Gettysburg Battlefield, I am confident that the spirit of these leaders is still with us, and we are the better for it. I love living here and hope to, as I say, "die in my zip code"!

SAVE THE DATE



Community Dinners For The Benefit Of West Mt. Airy Neighbors

The 5th annual *Eat Your Heart Out!* is scheduled for Saturday, April 10, 2010 and will be co-chaired by Gina and Gary Smith. *Eat Your Heart Out!* is West Mt. Airy Neighbors'

signature fund raising event. Guests meet for cocktails and hors d'oeuvres in one magnificent West Mt. Airy home and then disperse throughout the neighborhood to enjoy one of the delicious dinners served in wonderful houses. Dinners are prepared by some of Philadelphia's most talented restaurateurs, caterers, private chefs and home chefs.

Eat Your Heart Out! supports West Mt. Airy Neighbors' core programs which enhance the quality of life for residents of this renowned, racially integrated community. *Eat Your Heart Out!* sells out quickly every year, so be sure to make your reservations promptly when your invitation arrives.



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MT. AIRY GATEWAY PROJECT



Photo: Courtesy of Germantown Historical Society, A.C. Chadwick – Wissahickon Collection

On Saturday, October 31, the two stone piers and their adjacent walls framing the intersection of Lincoln Drive and Johnson Street were uncovered by 30 volunteers who removed invasive plants and vines, picked up trash and cleared pathways. These piers once supported pergolas donated to Fairmont Park in 1900 by philanthropist and Wyndmoor resident Edward T. Stotesbury. The piers serve as a gateway into Mt. Airy, and the pier located on the west side of Lincoln Drive also marks an entrance into Fairmount Park. The pergolas, and the two additional piers that once helped support them, have been gone since a street widening in the 1950s.

A growing group of neighbors and neighborhood organizations including Germantown Historical Society, West Mt. Airy Neighbors Streetscapes Committee, Johnson Street Neighbors, ParkPups.org, Friends of the Wissahickon, and Friends of Clifford Park has begun planning the restoration of the pergolas in conjunction with improvements to the surrounding Fairmount Park landscape. Invaluable support and assistance will continue to be provided by the Fairmount Park Commission, which furnished tools, safety gear and guidance for the clean-up.



Photo: Alexandra Morigi



Photo: Alexandra Morigi

WMAN Celebrates 50 Years 1959-2009

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