

Pat Henning
Germantown Historical Society Hall of Fame
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By Laura Morris Siena

I remember several years ago, when Mt. Airy was the focus of yet another study on racially integrated communities, I was helping the researcher, Barbara Ferman of Temple, with ideas for resources and people she might interview. Of course, she met with Pat first, and she came back armed with tons of valuable information about the early history of Mt. Airy's integration efforts.

A few months later, I ran into Barbara and one of her young graduate students coming out of the offices of the Mt. Airy Times Express. She told me that she had been there to learn about the newspaper's role in sustaining Mt. Airy as an integrated community. I remarked, "Well, you could have saved yourself a trip and just interviewed Pat Henning again. She founded the newspaper." Pat not only founded the Mt. Airy Express with some neighbors as a community-owned newspaper co-sponsored by East and West Mt. Airy Neighbors, but she served as the managing editor in the early years. I thought then, and I know now, that most roads in Mt. Airy lead to Pat's door.

Pat's community work has focused on West Mt. Airy, and I will focus on that too. However, we all know that West Mt. Airy is just one part of a larger community which includes Germantown, East Mt. Airy and Chestnut Hill – the original German Township – which is one of the most historically significant and vibrant communities in the eastern United States. In fact, until not too long ago, the whole area was known as "Germantown" and these newer designations are simply part of the natural way that we name our world so as to bring order to and frame our sense of community in human scale.

West Mt. Airy was one of the first, and continues to be one of the most successful, communities which have worked to create and sustain racial integration over time. Barbara Ferman's work on Mt. Airy was part of a national HUD study on fourteen urban diverse neighborhoods, published in 1998. The study's authors take pains to point out what common factors make these rare communities successful.

Three of these factors bear mention in reference to Pat's life and work. First, to quote Jane Jacobs, the presence of "social seams" which bring people together across racial and ethnic lines are essential to building the relationships of trust which enable integration to flourish. These social seams can be physical, like a shopping district or a library, or they can be institutional or even social. While we have many of these in Mt. Airy, the study authors picked out the Mt. Airy Learning Tree for special recognition. That's a good thing, since Pat was one of the founders of the Mt. Airy Learning Tree.

I would say that Pat herself is one of those social seams. She has always instinctively known who to bring together to create something new and important to strengthen our community. In the parlance of Malcolm Gladwell, who wrote "The Tipping Point" Pat's a connector.

Second, strong community-based organizations help to address real community needs and strengthen the social fabric. West Mt. Airy Neighbors, on whose board Pat served for many years, is just such an organization. WMAN was founded explicitly to promote racial integration, and its early leaders were the drivers of that effort. Since then, generations of volunteers have worked through WMAN to solve community problems and make living in Mt. Airy great.

Finally, the study authors point to *residents' awareness* of the community's stable diversity as an essential ingredient for success. This kind of self-consciousness becomes its own engine for integration, as the community then attracts residents who want to participate in it. Pat's work in developing and maintaining the huge bibliography on Mt. Airy, her oral histories of early integration activists, and her service as part-time librarian of the Germantown Historical Society in the early 1980s have helped to build that self-awareness among her neighbors. As we have been studied and written about, and as Pat has made those resources available to scholars and others, we have gained insights and consciousness into just how precious and rare our community is. We have gained community pride, a sense that we are innovators in living creatively into America's diverse future now.

Bringing people to a deeper understanding of Mt. Airy's history and culture has been an essential focus for Pat's activities. A long-time chair of the Historical Awareness Committee co-sponsored by East and West Mt. Airy Neighbors, Pat organized house tours, began the George Schermer Lecture and other events at Lovett Library, and put Germantown Avenue in Mt. Airy on the National Register of Historic Places.

Pat and I worked closely together in organizing "*Healing History: The Story of Racial Integration in Mt. Airy*," a public forum we held in 1999 to publicize the results of that HUD study. We were delighted and surprised when 400 people showed up at 4 pm on a Thursday afternoon to hear from the researchers – solid evidence of how much the story of Mt. Airy means to people.

I have a theory about communities like Mt. Airy. The significant institutions in our society – our federal and local government, our financial institutions, our land use policies – are organized to promote segregation. This is particularly true in the post-war era. In the last half-century, these institutions have also been organized to promote a lack of cohesiveness among people, a lack of community. How and why this is so is the topic for a longer talk, but the fact of the matter is that communities like Mt. Airy -- and areas like northwest Philadelphia -- are bucking powerful institutional arrangements when they seek to create different narratives for themselves, narratives which value integration over segregation, community involvement over alienation.

The energy and civic engagement involved in swimming against this tide has two related results: first, *individuals* are called to hold themselves to a higher standard of living in community. Throughout the history of our community, we have seen people exceeding their own expectations to create something new and wonderful. From the courageous religious leaders who in 1953 signed a covenant between the Germantown Jewish Center, the Unitarian Church, and Summit Presbyterian Church to welcome new African American residents to Mt. Airy and not to move away themselves, to the work of George Schermer, who came here from Detroit to

head up the Human Relations Commission and who was so instrumental in stabilizing Mt. Airy as an integrated community, to all of the individual citizens who worked for and still work today for those goals, individuals reach beyond themselves to create and sustain a rich fabric of connections and community.

Second, all of these individual efforts, taken together, result in a *cumulative social capital* which in turn strengthens our community and enables it to meet its continued challenges. We all stand on the shoulders of those who went before us. Individuals contribute greatly, and the sum of their contributions is greater than the parts. Individuals can realize a higher potential for themselves, and this in turn builds community for the group.

Pat's life fits beautifully into this rubric. Through her activism on the part of the community, she has reached beyond herself and likely even surprised herself with the range and scale of her accomplishments. Pat's private career would have been enough for one life, although it might not have brought us together in specific celebration today. She could have been "simply" a great reference librarian – heaven knows, she had a very successful career at the University of Pennsylvania and as head of Reference and Adjunct Associate Professor of Library Science at Drexel University. Or, she could have been content with her second career as a Realtor, confident that she was helping to maintain integration by encouraging homebuyers to look at the whole community. But she chose a parallel career of community activism. By doing so, she co-founded a newspaper and a "university without walls," and she helped to connect all of us to our past through her work on raising awareness of Mt. Airy's history. This, in turn, has given us the strength to approach our future confident that the narrative of Mt. Airy as a vibrant, active, successfully integrated community will carry forth past our own time.

To celebrate West Mt. Airy Neighbors' 35th Anniversary, Pat organized a concert at the Germantown Cricket Club. This concert combined two somewhat disparate elements – Pat's love for the folk singer Susan Werner and West Mt. Airy Neighbors' eternal need to raise funds to support its work. Tony Williams, himself a Germantown Historical Society Hall of Famer, would do the second set. Would people come? Would the concert be a flop? Would we raise any money? I remember Pat agonizing over these questions along with the minutia of arranging the concert itself. I will never forget Pat on concert night, addressing the overflow crowd at intermission, arms held up in triumph, a wide smile on her face. "Isn't this wonderful?" she crowed?

Yes, Pat, it was wonderful, because you are wonderful. Thank you for being who you are, doing what you do, and being an essential and beloved part of, and a tremendous leader for, our exceptional community.