

## Shirley Hanson: A cornerstone of Chestnut Hill history

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by **Frank Niepold**

In 1966, the nation's interest in historic preservation had begun to surge – culminating that year in the creation of the National Register of Historic Places and in many individual efforts across the nation, including Chestnut Hill. That same year, the local chapter of the VFW wished to reduce the size of its prominent building on Germantown Avenue, and began to remove its third floor.

With a dawning awareness of historic preservation, and troubled by the alteration that had begun at this Germantown Avenue icon, a young Chestnut Hill mother of two (later, three) stepped forward. Shirley Hanson joined Nancy Hubby, Ann Spaeth, and others in a community fundraising effort to restore the building.

But the efforts that began with one building soon spread to the celebration and protection of the entire community's architectural heritage. Within a year they founded the Chestnut Hill Historical Society (CHHS), now the Chestnut Hill Conservancy. This citizen- and community-led effort launched architectural preservation in Chestnut Hill.

Shirley went on to earn a Master of City Planning degree at Penn and a successful career as a preservationist and businesswoman. Her happiest and most rewarding work, though, was as a volunteer to initiate preservation and conservation efforts in Chestnut Hill, greater Philadelphia and also Montgomery County.

A brief three years after CHHS became a nonprofit, it welcomed hundreds to an "Evening of Speculation" to hear Robert Venturi, Louis Kahn, and Romaldo Giurgola discuss Chestnut Hill's past and future. A newsletter published by CHHS in 1972 referred to Shirley Hanson as "the guiding force behind the Society's success." In 2017, everyone connected with the Conservancy says exactly the same thing!

Just last April 21, an audience of almost 400 people attended a remarkable "Visionaries Roundtable." Then, a panel of experts discussed the development challenges facing Chestnut Hill. Shirley Hanson envisioned, organized (with Dan Macey), and introduced the event.

Chestnut Hill has been fortunate to benefit from her energy and commitment. Without her leadership; over the last 50 years, our community today would be vastly different – and architecturally poorer. Stunningly, Shirley Hanson remains an active leader on the Conservancy's board of directors, having served consistently and with great strength of purpose throughout its 50 year history!

For the Conservancy's recent "Perennial Fete" celebration, she prepared thoughts on the essential elements behind the organization's achievements, which are ready now to invigorate the organization's next 50 years. Her words deserve a wider audience.

### ***What Is at the Heart of the Chestnut Hill Conservancy?***

by Shirley Hanson

3 Elements!

First, the community of Chestnut Hill is front and center in its totality – its land, its people, and its buildings.





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I saw the outpouring to save the VFW Building – one piece of our community – as an opportunity in 1966 for donors to show their appreciation for Chestnut Hill and that important institution. You could call it a demonstration of community spirit.

Second, at its heart is a hard-working, committed board of directors and volunteers

Our first project as an organization looked at Chestnut Hill as a unit. Under the guidance of our project consultants, Will and Susan Detweiler, it demanded board commitment and 50 volunteers to accomplish. We undertook a land-use study of every parcel of land in Chestnut Hill and traced – through countless deeds – the histories of some 600 properties.

This volunteer effort fed into the Detweilers' publication: "Chestnut Hill: An Architectural History." Before the publication a few skeptical residents could say, "There is nothing historic in Chestnut Hill." Afterward, I never heard that argument.

Years later, in 1985, through the work of consultants and volunteers we nominated virtually all of Chestnut Hill as a Historic District on the National Register of Historic Places. This is an honor. The day-to-day work of looking after the Chestnut Hill Historic District remains in the hands of the Conservancy.

Third, is a dedicated and talented staff

For most of our years we traveled light, so that nearly all of our resources could go directly into the community.

Recently, you experienced extra energy and excitement around the programs of the Conservancy. That results from our amazing staff!

Together the board, volunteers, and staff – intersecting with each other and with the remarkable community of Chestnut Hill, including its array of strong organizations, are ready to help to direct its future.

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