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CH Conservancy looks forward after wrapping up historic 50th year

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(http://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Story_Lights.jpg)

The Chestnut Hill Conservancy's 'Night of Lights' was a public celebration of Chestnut Hill architecture and history, a highlight of the organization's 50th year.

by Pete Mazzaccaro

For Lori Salganicoff, executive director of the Chestnut Hill Conservancy, the organization's 50th year was in many ways more of the same things the former Chestnut Hill Historical Society has always done.

It added nine acres of Wissahickon Watershed to its 140-acre collection of open space easements and preserved two homes by architect Theophilus P. Chandler, a founder of the University of Pennsylvania's Department of Architecture. It hosted a Visionaries Roundtable that drew more than 400 neighborhood residents, launched a comprehensive neighborhood

study in partnership with the Chestnut Hill Community Association and threw its first “Night of Lights” street event that brought lights, photos and stories to outdoor locations on Germantown Avenue.

It was also the organization’s first year under its new name: The Chestnut Hill Conservancy. That name change, Salganicoff said, has helped clear up the organization’s mission, but has not signaled a change in what it does.

“We haven’t changed at all,” she said. “We’ve been true to our mission – to celebrate architecture, open space and history in this community. Changing our name helped us own that mission.”

That mission, Salganicoff said, was realized this year and in the past through a series of techniques including public forums like the Visionaries Roundtable in April, educational events like the Conservancy’s monthly “Ask the Expert” series and, most important, its ongoing and significant easement program that not only helps preserve the façades of the neighborhood’s most notable historic buildings, but protects its considerable open space.

In fact, Chestnut Hill, Salganicoff said, has the first accredited land trust in an urban setting in the U.S. It’s that tool that has enabled the conservancy to protect 140 acres in Chestnut Hill. Those 140 acres are protected through easements, deals between property owners and the conservancy in which the owners surrender their rights to develop the property in exchange for tax incentives.

The 140-acres worth of open space easements represent a sizable collection but is less than a third of what the organization would like to get a hold of. Salganicoff said the conservancy has identified 400 acres in Chestnut Hill and some 1,700 other acres in the rest of the Wissahickon Watershed in Mt. Airy, Roxborough and Montgomery County.

That program, she said, is vital in its effect on the region’s water supply, something that Salganicoff said is too often overlooked in urban concerns about open space.

“Right now most if not all vacant land strategies focus on equitable development or development of open space for recreation,” she said. “There’s no mechanism, incentive or structure to simply consider not developing environmentally vulnerable open space. That’s a huge thing for us.”

While adding to that 140-acre collection of protected open space is a priority for 2018, Salganicoff said the conservancy will still be busy protecting historic properties. In addition to preserving the Chandler properties (one of which is 30 W. Chestnut Hill Avenue, a home that was nearly razed before the Conservancy was involved) the Conservancy succeeded in having the Dorothy Shipley Residence placed on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places.

That home, a modern structure on Glengarry Road, was the work of Romaldo Giurgola, a prominent modern architect. It rounded out a trio of internationally significant modern homes in Chestnut Hill with the Vanna Venturi House designed by Venturi Scott Brown and the Esherick House by Louis Kahn.

It’s important work. All three houses were until very recently unprotected and might have been razed and their properties developed by right.

“There’s enormous vulnerability here,” Salganicoff said. “We have hundreds of buildings that could be built by right without any public process in Chestnut Hill ... The 30 West Chestnut Hill Avenue development is a perfect example of a compromise that is uncomfortable to some but one on which we worked very hard. The five to six homes proposed by the developer could have been built by right.

It's a process that Salganicoff said requires an enormous amount of work on the part of the Conservancy – to both preserve the significant architecture in the neighborhood, but to work with developers in an open way. It is a challenge illustrated by development projects at 30 W. Chestnut Hill Ave and 2 E. Chestnut Hill Ave.

"What we're trying to promote is not just historic preservation and conservation but that design matters," she said. "Open space matters, how you build here matters ... And building new is not inherently a bad thing. Development is not a bad thing. But what we have here is a traction of careful thoughtful development that incorporates green space and high design."

To that end, Salganicoff said the Conservancy is planning to continue many of the hallmarks of this past year. It is planning on a bigger and better Night of Lights and adding more properties to the Chestnut Hill Architecture Hall of Fame. It hopes to strengthen its "Ask the Expert" series, in which home improvement experts hold seminars that are free to the public and paid for by the Conservancy. It also plans to implement a system in which home owners can explore registering their own homes on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places, the best method of preserving historic homes in the city.

In the remainder of the year, Salganicoff said the Conservancy is working hard to close about a \$24,000 funding gap in the next month. It's a small gap, she said, for the organization, which has only two full-time employees, three part-time employees and an annual budget of \$300,000.

"Part of what really makes us successful is our board," Salganicoff said. "We have one of most talented, hard working boards I've ever worked with. It's incredible how dedicated and generous they are with their time."

Salganicoff said the Conservancy is always looking for help. Many, she said, will volunteer as part of one of their committees and some, from those positions, rotate to the board of directors.

"We hope people will understand the work we're doing," Salganicoff said. "We hope people will see that what we're doing as an organization is truly for the benefit of the community. We can only do that work if people join."

For more information, to volunteer or to give, see chconservancy.org

Pete Mazzaccaro can be reached at 215-248-8802 or pete@chestnuthilllocal.com

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