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Discovering Chestnut Hill: Engage today with Chestnut Hill's past and future

Posted on June 13, 2019 (<https://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/2019/06/13/discovering-chestnut-hill-engage-today-with-chestnut-hills-past-and-future/>) by Contributor (<https://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/author/contributor/>)

by Lori Salganicoff

This biweekly Discovering Chestnut Hill column allows the Chestnut Hill Conservancy and the Chestnut Hill Local to share and highlight some of the things that make Chestnut Hill so special. The community is a unique place, defined by its interwoven history, great architecture and undisturbed open space.

The Chestnut Hill Conservancy's work to preserve the area's significant historical, environmental and architectural resources is made possible by hundreds of community members, supporters and partners. Thanks to the support and great work of you and your neighbors, the Conservancy has now celebrated our history in new and exciting ways, conserved over 100 acres of privately held watershed land and trees and preserved dozens of important historic buildings.

Our archives tell the story of what makes Chestnut Hill special through an ever-expanding collection of documents, photographs, maps, deeds, objects and more. In the last year, the Conservancy embarked on an oral history project, recording six new interviews to go with the 90-plus already in the collection.

This diverse compilation documents community members' stories of everyday life in Chestnut Hill, recording memories and experiences that may have been lost. These oral histories will be transcribed and included in the Conservancy collection, thereby capturing in the written word what would not have been otherwise. We look forward to sharing our discoveries with you as the project continues and invite you to consider participating. Interested? Contact the Conservancy, or sign up at this fall's Night of Lights public exhibit of archives and architecture along Germantown Avenue.

This past winter, the Conservancy celebrated over 100 acres under easement – in addition to preserving and protecting open space, scenic views, and natural habitats, these grants of easement allow property owners to prevent future subdivision of their properties at a time when heightened development pressure is being felt throughout the area. As many as 1,000 new homes could be built under current zoning codes in the many subdividable, environmentally critical parcels in Chestnut Hill. Our innovative Conservation and Easements Program, in partnership with Friends of the Wissahickon, is one of the strongest tools available to ensure the Wissahickon watershed's historic, green, urban village character remains.

The Conservancy is working together with several groups of neighbors in Chestnut Hill and surrounding areas to protect community character as development pressures grow. These efforts include supporting neighbors to avert the demolition of the fire-damaged Keewaydin complex by partnering with current Keewaydin homeowners. The Conservancy was able to

submit an application to the Philadelphia Historical Commission and protect the entire three-building complex.

Using the regrettable loss last summer of the beloved and highly significant Medinger House at 8600 Montgomery Ave. in Wyndmoor, the Conservancy is helping lead the push for the creation of Springfield Township's first preservation ordinance to protect historic architecture there. We are committed to working diligently and collaboratively for more proactive solutions to preserve significant architectural and environmental resources. But these will take time, creativity, and your engagement if they are to happen.

The benefit of being increasingly proactive is that threats to community character can sometimes be averted before they become visible or a crisis. The downside of solving problems discretely is that much of our work is invisible to most. And our work has only just begun – efforts to conserve, preserve, manage redevelopment and celebrate our history have never been so important.

If you are not yet a member – but believe that land conservation is important to the health of our community, want to know more about our history, and believe we must balance growth and development with preservation and conservation – please consider investing in your community with a Conservancy membership at CHConservancy.org/membership (<http://CHConservancy.org/membership>)

We cannot support the community without community support. Please join today or give the gift of membership to a neighbor and help us reach our end-of-fiscal year membership goals by June 30.

Lori Salganicoff is the executive director of the Chestnut Hill Conservancy.

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