



Germantown Chronicle

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Residents Get a Voice at Settlement Bankruptcy

By KRISTEN MOSBRUCKER
and JOSH FERNANDEZ
Guest Writers

Something unusual happened at the federal bankruptcy hearing on Thursday, October 21 for Germantown Settlement, a social services and housing non-profit that has been awarded over \$100 million dollars over the past 25 years in grant money. Community members as well as creditors, debtors, and attorneys had a chance to let their voice be heard in court.

Over a dozen residents came to the hearing, where Settlement's plan of reorganization was supposed to be discussed. However, the plan had been formally withdrawn just a day before. Irv Ackelsberg, a

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Fire broke at on the third floor of the former Germantown YWCA building on Wednesday, October 13, causing damage primarily to the third floor, according to the Philadelphia Fire Department. The blaze was reported at 5:16 p.m. and was declared under control about an hour later. The fire was intentionally set, according to the Fire Department. Two firefighters were injured battling the blaze, neither seriously. A week later the city's Redevelopment Authority announced its intention to reclaim the property from Germantown Settlement; for more see story at left.

Cliveden Seeks Continued Community Dialog

By KEISHA FRAZIER and LISA WILK
Guest Writers

The conversation never seems to end at Cliveden of the National Trust, 6401 Germantown Avenue.

On October 15, nearly 50 community members gathered in the Carriage House at Cliveden to participate in the final event of "The Cliveden Conversation" four-talk series which began on Sept. 10.

Instigated by the impact of recent research surrounding slavery and the Chew family, the discussion series was created to provide a public forum for community members to discuss race relations in connection with Chew family documents, Cliveden and the Germantown community. Ultimately, Cliveden hopes to get the community's insight on how Cliveden can better serve the neighborhood.

At the final discussion, Cliveden Executive Director David Young outlined 20th century preservation and public memory efforts in Germantown with respect to racial issues. Young challenged the common knowledge of Germantown history and urged the residents to rewrite their history to include some missing pieces.

"The 15 sites of Germantown tend to tell the Revolutionary, the Colonial and the Victorian history, and what does that leave out? The 20th century," Young said.

Young said he hopes that the Chew papers could be used to create a "community of memory," which author Richard Handler has described as "a group of individuals who agree that they share some kind of cultural heritage and they talk about the heritage in ways that celebrate what is good in it, and criticize what is not."

Cliveden was completed in 1767. It lies behind a gate and is known to quite a few in the community only for its role in the Battle of Germantown. To Young, Cliveden's physical distance from the main

street represents how closed off the Chew family history was from the rest of the community.

"The access points to Cliveden are the farthest removed from Germantown Avenue. The gate is always closed except for two or three days a year," Young said. "This is a problem for a historical site."

Young took the time to set the stage for Germantown in the year 2000. A decade ago the population of Germantown stood at about 43,000 people. Of this population 73 percent were African American, 7 percent were Asian, and 24 percent were living below the poverty line. Young said he suspects the number living in poverty has increased in recent years. He then pointed out that within this diverse population 52 community groups, 15 historical sites and 93 churches exist. He said it was important for these groups to develop a voice in the history of the neighborhood.

Young took his listeners on a historical journey of preservation and memory efforts. He highlighted the 1688 protest against slavery. He described Germantown's role in the abolitionist movement. One of the stops in the Underground Railroad was in Germantown.

Young noted the work of John Fanning Watson, who is generally considered one of the city's first historians. He was one of the founders of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Young referred to him as a "citizen historian" and explained how Watson began documenting Germantown's history early on by conducting surveys and oral history.

"Watson established a sort of standard of the memory infrastructure. In Germantown the memory infrastructure, all the monuments, the museums, the markers have always been about the Colonial [period] until very recently, and that's because of Watson," Young

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Residents Get a Say at Settlement Bankruptcy Hearing

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pro bono lawyer for the community, was the first local resident to speak up.

"Many of us can surmise the day we can say Germantown Settlement is over," he said. "The people and the institutions and businesses of Germantown have suffered."

Ackelsberg requested that residents be permitted to be heard and the opportunity to question if another plan is presented by the bankrupt non-profit.

"It's not a high hurdle given the circumstances, I wouldn't deny them [residents] the opportunity to be heard," said Chief Judge Stephen Raslavich.

Jim Foster, life long resident and current publisher of this newspaper, testified about information that had not been brought before the court. He said that when Settlement attorney Thomas Bielli withdrew the plan of reorganization Settlement requested to be able to sell assets including the former YWCA building at 5820 Germantown Avenue and the Burgess Center office building at Wayne and Cheltenham avenues, to a

new buyer they had found. The attorney told the judge the YWCA was a gift to Settlement from the City of Philadelphia.

"That was incorrect, the YWCA was bought with a \$1.3 million dollar loan with help from the city," said Foster. "It was also 110 percent of the asking price for the building, more money than what it was worth, and Settlement never made a payment on it," he added.

Also, Settlement attorney Thomas Bielli, did not mention to Judge Raslavich about an arson fire that destroyed two floors of the YWCA just a week before the hearing.

Judge Raslavich decided that the Germantown community should have a representative in the case. Ackelsberg volunteered to act as attorney and Betty Turner, Germantown Community Connection president, will be the representative.

Debra Roberts, director of operations at the Wister Neighborhood Council, attended the bankruptcy hearing too. Wister NAC had paid Settlement to do their bookkeeping and when Roberts became a board member in 2006 the NAC took

over their own financials again. They were shocked. Their taxes hadn't been paid, financial statements to the IRS were incomplete, and had to pay about \$10,000 in liens.

Roberts doesn't think that Settlement has the ability to restructure. She said, "Most of their properties have been vacant for 7 or 8 years. Settlement has been giving us this story of restructuring and reorganizing for almost ten years now. I don't believe they are capable of doing that."

The Redevelopment Authority (RDA) is one of Settlement's largest creditors. Overall, including Greater Germantown Housing Development Corporation (GGHDC) a Settlement subsidiary, the non-profit owes more than \$38 million to date in loans from federal, state, and local government.

However there was no Redevelopment Authority (RDA) official present at the hearing on Thursday. Afterwards, Ackelsberg said he was disappointed that the RDA was not there.

"Perhaps we're not seeing that much aggressiveness from the government because the govern-

ment enabled and funded this disgrace for so long," he said. "The big question is who's calling the shots from the city [government]."

Instead, the RDA filed a default notification on Thursday that said it is going to sell the YWCA by December 7. Terry Gillen, Executive Director of the RDA, told the Philadelphia Inquirer that

the agency decided reclaim the property so it can be restored and put back into use.

In 2006 the RDA loaned Settlement \$1.3 million to purchase the Germantown YWCA.

The authors work for Philadelphia Neighborhoods at www.philadelphianeighborhoods.com.

Cliveden Seeks Input

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explained.

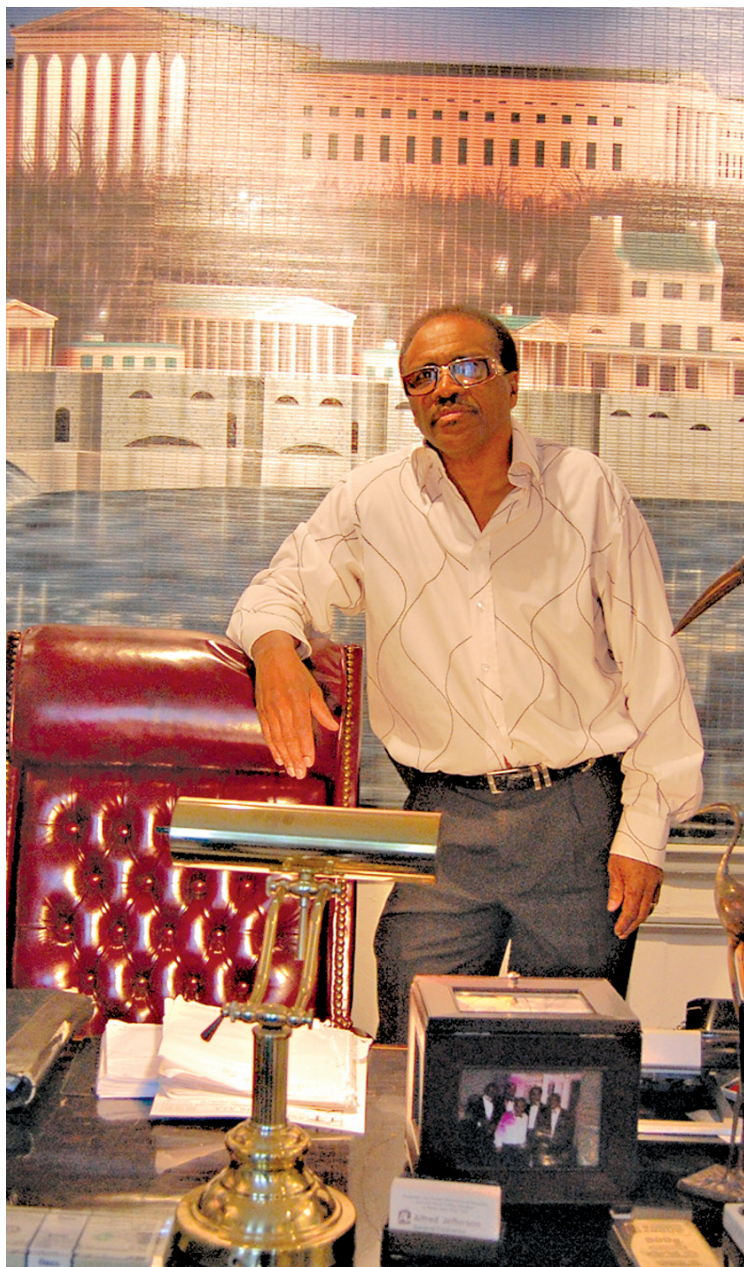
Young identified many other historians and spent time discussing how the African-American community was creating memory and documenting its history. But the Cliveden director also noted that in the 20th century Germantown had 1,200 members of the Ku Klux Klan living in the area. These accounts are yet another piece of Germantown history that is not typically taught within the community, he added.

With new initiatives like the Cliveden discussions and "Germantown Speaks," which is a project that unites local high school students and longtime

Germantown residents, Young said he thinks local history is being rewritten.

As the conversation neared its end, one woman inquired about what happens when the conversation is over. The answer was simple. Members of Cliveden rely on the community members to provide their feedback and express what they would like to see occur in the future, Young said. While the Cliveden staff has ideas, opinions from the residents are highly valued, he added.

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