

Benches Dedicated at William Allen Plaza

Once, the 146-year-old Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia (LTSP) gave the architectural impression of being “walled-off” from the Mt. Airy community it has historically and increasingly supported over the years.

Visually, that changed a year ago with the dedication of William Allen Plaza, a public square on Germantown Avenue in front of the seminary’s chapel. Now, several Mt. Airy business leaders, inspired by the initiative, have taken the project a step further by donating the creation and installation of three just-completed permanent benches to make the plaza even more accommodating to visitors.

The benches, which “wrap around” three trees on the plaza, were fabricated by craftsman Matt Sharaat of Mt. Airy Custom Furniture, and dedicated December 3 as part of the tree lighting and caroling event held annually for the seminary and Mt. Airy community.

The plaza furniture project was the brainchild of Elise Rivers, who



Attendees sat on and touched the benches during the dedication ceremony on December 3. They had previously engaged in a community carol sing, singing popular old carols with enthusiasm in the chilly evening.

with her husband moved to Mt. Airy six years ago. Rivers explains she and her husband have both formed strong businesses, hers being Community Acupuncture of Mt. Airy, originally located on the 500-block of East Sedgwick Street, which at the end of last March relocated to new quarters at

6782 Germantown Avenue. Her business is steadily growing, she says.

“I’ve always loved the outdoors,” she explains, “and when I saw the space I thought it is just what the community needs along Germantown Avenue. I have felt

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so grateful for this wonderful, diverse neighborhood in which to live and work and the community support which has made my business so successful, and I wanted to give something back." She adds she found further purpose in the project through her role as a board member of the Mt. Airy Business Improvement District (MABID).

In pondering the benches idea, Rivers contacted Ken Weinstein, owner of the Trolley Car Diner and current MABID chair for advice and support. Weinstein said he told Rivers that the seminary has historically supported the Mt. Airy community in multiple ways.

"During the Germantown Avenue reconstruction, the seminary community really supported the diner, which was so negatively impacted for a time by the construction," Weinstein said. The road excavation made access to the restaurant a real challenge for

many months. Weinstein also praises the seminary for investing in the fledgling Valley Green Bank five years ago. The bank, which now has three locations, got its start across the street from the campus. In addition, Weinstein said, the seminary has energetically participated in Martin Luther King Day service projects and initiatives like cleanups along Chew Avenue.

Weinstein explains Rivers became "hooked" on supporting the project when she learned more of the seminary's history of community involvement. She met with Krey, then pledged a \$4,000 gift toward the benches. Weinstein made a \$1,000 supportive pledge and also contacted Robert Elfant of Elfant-Wissahickon Realtors, who pledged \$1,000 toward the project. And Elfant contacted Edward Hillis, owner of Domus Inc., the Germantown general contractor recently involved in build

ing a new Weaver's Way Co-op store on Germantown Avenue in Chestnut Hill. Hillis made a \$1,000 gift. The Seminary also made a \$2,000 gift toward the project. The \$9,000 total made the project possible.

Participating in the Friday evening ceremonies were LTSP President Philip Krey, bench donors Elise Rivers, Bob Elfant and Ken Weinstein, East Mt. Airy Neighbors President Dan Muroff, Mt. Airy USA Executive Director Anuj Gupta, LTSP Professor Katie Day, and Philadelphia City Councilwoman Donna Reed Miller. Professor Day lead the prayer for the dedication of the benches, and Councilwoman Miller flipped the switch to light the plaza tree. Seminary Director of Music Ministries and Cantor Michael Krentz and seminarian Pam Peterson, playing the flute, lead the community in singing carols.