

# Coventry Village News

October, 2002

## From the New President's Pen

Bruce M. Hennes

**It was 1969. The Summer of Love. If you couldn't get to Haight-Ashbury, Coventry did just fine. Bikers, dopers, cheap apartments, late night bites at Irv's, rolling papers from both the CovenTree or Carroll Drugs and a bottle of wine from Cargo. It was pre-cable, pre-VCR, pre-Gateway, pre-yuppie, pre-Musician's Towers and LBJ was all the way. Coventry was the place to hang.**

**B**ut this isn't meant to be the history of Coventry Village, so let's skip much of the intervening 32 years. We'll not delve into the origins or aftermath of the four fires that forever changed the face Coventry nor will we wax rhapsodic over Street Fairs past. And we already said goodbye years ago in the pages of the newsletter you hold in your hands to The Food Project, Silver Legal Clinic, Dr. Phil (the Drill) Imperi, Frankel Jewelry, Bill Jones Leather, The Llama Shop, Paul Danforth Studio, The Emporium, Rocco's Fish Market, New England Clam House, Hyde Park Restaurant, The Light of Yoga Society, The Coventry Café, Coventry Pizza, The Mad Greek, The Food Co-Op, The Chicken Plucker, Rainblue, Popcorn Shop, C-Saw Cafe, Tout le Monde, David's Cookies, Arabica, Brunatti's, The Free Times, Coventry Optical, Coventry Books, City Books, Chubby's, Turkey Ridge, Haagen-Dazs, Mitchell's Candies, Pick-N-Pay, The Silversmith, Coventry Books, Man Talk, Kelso's Earth Shoes, Jeans West, Café D'Oro (and whatever replaced it), Condomania, Landmark Theatres, Biashara, Wilderness Outfitters, Heights Pet World, Taj Mahal Restaurant, PeeWee's Bike Shop, Bike One, Apple Deli, Ascherman Photography, Soul Vegetarian, Turkey Ridge Restaurant, the still-lamented Heights Art Theatre and all the other shops lost to fast fires and changing tastes.

From the Oral History of Coventry Neighbors, Inc., Coventry Neighbors came into being in 1969 in answer to neighborhood concerns about fair housing, the deterioration of the commercial district, and the general need to create an "us" that would be poised to fight the inevitable "them" as events warranted. The first president was Chuck Matthews and during those early years Alan Rapoport, Dennis Niermann, F. David Gill,

David Burwasser, Karen and Kermit Lind and others surfaced to lead the organization and its committees.

They came together as renters and homeowners to preserve, protect and defend Coventry from a Cuyahoga County Engineer who wanted to run new Rapid tracks down Coventry and eliminate the stores on the eastern side of the street; from a City Manager (now long gone) who needed a personality transplant; and from landlords who failed to reinvest in their buildings. They also came together to have fun - it took six months to mount a Street Fair with three stages and a guest list of 80,000, something that was done for about 15 years.

Sometime in the early 1980's, I had the privilege of serving as President of Coventry Neighbors. I think I came after Alan Rapoport (who went on to serve three terms as Mayor of our fine city) and before Chuck Owen, Larry Beam, Marilyn Pryor, Elsa Johnson and Jeff Dross. I also chaired the Editorial Committee that published the newsletter you now hold in your hands and I was the last person to run the Street Fair without being paid (because of the workload, it became a paid position until the decision was made by Coventry Neighbors to stop doing the Street Fair, but that's another story).

For almost a decade and a half, it was SRO at Coventry Neighbors' monthly meetings. If hoary oratory could be bottled, we'd have had a century's supply. Good luck if you didn't know Roberts Rules of Order cold. There were plenty of victories to go round. The Coventry Village News was often quoted in the P.D.; we held televised candidates nights; new merchants and property developers sought our blessing; we put a local option ordinance on the ballot and dried up Irv's Deli & Bar,

which had become a local trouble spot; and city officials returned our calls.

But times changed. In this case, the most-significant change was that long-term, multi-issue activism went out of style. Sure, Cleveland Heightsers still come together to try to stop one thing or another (the Visioning process aside), but in a town that once had a number of large, multi-issue neighborhood associations, only Coventry Neighbors remains.

As regular readers of this publication know, Coventry Neighbors no longer holds regular monthly meetings. Two years ago they went to quarterly meetings, most held without a quorum present. So with fewer and fewer people – and reasons – to hold a meeting, the decision to simply fold the organization or go into hiatus was put before the membership at last month's meeting.

The unanimous decision was made at that meeting to put the organization into a state of suspended animation that will, at the very least, preserve the organization's precious nonprofit 501(C)3 tax status. And that is exactly what we shall do, until such a time arises that good men, and good women, again have to rise up as a neighborhood to pan, praise, preserve or prepare for something that affects us all.

So just when I thought I'd paid my neighborhood-activist dues, I've been pulled back into the fray as your new President and Secretary of Coventry Neighbors, Inc., ably assisted by Bob Klemenc, Vice-President and Treasurer.

As President – again – this missive will take the place of my Second Inaugural Address, especially since it's likely to be a long time before the next meeting of the organization. With my remaining time and space, I want to tell you how I think we got here, to the near-end of Coventry Neighbors.

I've already mentioned one big macro factor: the lack of multi-issue neighborhood citizen activism. But I would suggest to you there are three other reasons for the near-demise of Coventry Neighbors.

1. The end of the Coventry Village Street Fair. Six months to plan and over a hundred volunteers to pull off, it was a great way to get to know new friends and neighbors. For many, it was a major, time-consuming communal activity. However, at the height of the Fair's popularity and regional brand-awareness, we stopped doing it because too many local homeowners and renters said "enough." And the merchants, while welcoming a Second Christmas, thought less and less of the major hassle every year. So, if not for them, for whom? Putting the Fair together for so many years gave reason to come to meetings. No Fair, no meetings.

2. The creation of the Coventry Village Development Corporation (CVDC) fifteen years ago. Comprised of Coventry merchants and commercial landlords, along with a few homeowners and renters, this group took major responsibility for the commercial district. With real dollars on the table – and livelihoods at stake – the CVDC became the locus for the commercial heart of Coventry Village. Essentially, Coventry Neighbor's portfolio was halved. Five years ago, the CVDC morphed into Ohio's second Special Improvement District (just like Times Square in NYC). Their strength became Coventry Neighbors' institutional weakness.

3. Our relations with City Hall. We started off as antagonists and ended up working with them. Not always friend, but no longer the enemy. There are a lot of terrific public servants who work for City Hall today and we all learned to work together, even when we opposed their position. Again, another reason not to meet.

I now stand before you as perhaps the final President of Coventry Neighbors. My first official act is to offer a great deal of thanks to Jeffrey Dross, Bob Klemenc and Sandy Jaffe who kept the organization alive in spite of the factors detailed above. My second act will be to make sure we do everything necessary to bank the fires for the long night and keep things legal enough for my third act – to someday pass the reigns of leadership on to the next President of Coventry Neighbors, Inc.

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