

On the Threshold of a Dream:

Cobbs Creek Environmental Education Center in Southwest Philadelphia Has a Home of Its Own.

By Abe Samuelson

For nearly a decade, residents of Southwest Philadelphia's Cobbs Creek neighborhood have dreamed of converting the historic stables at 63rd & Catherine Streets, into the permanent home of the Cobbs Creek Community Environmental Education Center (CCCEEC). The building, a Works Progress Administration (WPA) project built in 1936, once the home of the Fairmount Guard (the park's mounted police unit), has been abandoned and deteriorating for years. Despite a few false starts, the dedicated, community-based, volunteer board of directors never lost faith. Their dedication and hard work is about to pay off and their dream about to come true. Renovation of the stables has begun.

With the constant support and encouragement of State Senator Anthony H. Williams, the group has

successfully pressed both state and local government for capital appropriations toward the cost of renovations. The William Penn Foundation has also made a substantial contribution. Funding is now in place for the first phase of renovation and development of the education center.

The new building will contain meeting rooms, classrooms, administrative offices, and exhibition space. The current phase of construction is scheduled for completion in October 2000. The building's location in the Cobbs Creek stream valley, well removed from the busy neighborhoods and streets nearby, will provide an idyllic setting for the pursuit of environmental education and community projects. A capital campaign continues to raise the funds for completion of laboratories, construction of

caretaker's quarters, an interpretive trail system, picnic grove, and other planned landscape improvements

In the years since its inception, despite no paid staff and no home of its own, the CCCEEC has built a reputation for excellence in teacher training and environmental education programming. The programs of the CCCEEC are designed to help community members establish a personal connection with their local ecology. The Center is committed to strengthening environmental education in urban schools through hands-on activities, research, and teacher training. Credit for the outstanding success of CCCEEC programming is owed in part to the standard of excellence set by founder and board president Carole Chew Williams, and in part to the strong partnerships built with area residents, educational institutions,



Now undergoing renovations, the historic stables at 63rd & Catherine Streets, Philadelphia, PA, a Works Progress Administration (WPA) project built in 1936 (once the home of the Fairmount Guard) will be the permanent home of the Cobbs Creek Community Environmental Education Center (CCCEEC).



Left: Celebrating the start of construction of the new home of the Cobbs Creek Community Environmental Education Center (CCCEEC) at a reception at Historic Belmont Mansion are (left to right) Alan G. Fastman, Executive Director, CCCEEC; William E. Mifflin, Executive Director, Fairmount Park Commission; and Carole Chew Williams, President, CCCEEC.

Below: Bartram High School students display their President's Environmental Youth Awards at the White House.



and environmental advocates.

Carole Williams, a retired science curriculum specialist with the School District of Philadelphia, has been steadfast in her insistence that the instruction offered through CCCEEC, to the largely African American student body in southwest Philadelphia, be content rich and uncompromising in quality. "Our students deserve the same high quality, high tech programs as students in wealthy suburban districts. Far too few African American youngsters are choosing careers in science, fewer than three percent of our scientists are African American. Clearly, we need to do a better job of delivering science instruction in our urban schools," Williams said. "The Cobbs Creek Community Environmental Education Center remains committed to a content rich science curriculum for Philadelphia school children and to providing a point of entry to rewarding careers in science for people of color. In the process, we are building a greater awareness among city residents of the importance of a healthy natural environment."

Williams refers to CCCEEC's award-winning Park Management Youth Program as one clear example of the organization's ability to forge partnerships and deliver outstanding programming. In this case, the Fairmount Park Commission (FPC) invests considerable

resources, both materiel and personnel, in support of a six-week summer program for high school students. The program focuses on environmental sciences with a service learning component involving restoration and repair of the park and creek. According to FPC Executive Director Bill Mifflin, "The CCCEEC's successful work with young people and community volunteers is very important to Fairmount Park's overall expansion of our educational programming and stewardship opportunities, as well as to the general quality of natural resources in the Cobbs Creek watershed. We look forward to an ongoing collaboration with CCCEEC, including expansion of the Park Management Youth Program into a year-round program." Others who have contributed to the program's success include, the Academy of Natural Sciences, Bryn Mawr College, Drexel University, Haverford College, Penn State University School of Forest Resources, Philadelphia Water Department, the Philadelphia Zoo, and the School District of Philadelphia. In 1998, Bartram High School students received the President's Environmental Youth Award, at a White House ceremony, for their work with the Park Management Youth Program.

Without a home of its own, CCCEEC has relied on the hospitality of Penn State University. For

nearly ten years, the university has graciously provided office space at the site of the Philadelphia Cooperative Extension. Elmore Hunter, now a Special Assistant to the Vice President for Student Affairs at PSU, was County Extension Director in 1991, when Williams first approached him with her idea to create an environmental education center in West Philadelphia. Hunter has served on the board of directors of CCCEEC since its incorporation in 1992. He is currently 1st Vice President and Secretary of the non-profit corporation. As Hunter tells it, "My relationship with Carole dates back to the 1980's, when I was Extension Director and she was a science curriculum specialist. She provided entry into the school system for our 4-H programs at that time. The chance for Penn State to support a grass-roots effort to establish an urban center for environmental education seemed to me to be a 'can't miss' opportunity, given the strong emphasis we place in our College of Agricultural Sciences, School of Forest Resources on environmental education and our desire to increase our presence in Pennsyl-



Volunteers from neighboring communities join Cobbs Creek Community Environmental Education Center (CCCEEC) volunteers in removing invasive plants from area adjacent to the center's future home in the park. Joseph Caesar, Community Liaison for Fairmount Park Commission's Natural Lands Restoration & Environmental Education Program (right, foreground) directs the activity.

vania's urban centers. Our commitment to CCCEEC is long-term. We can't wait to get into the new building and strengthen our partnership with 4-H youth programs, internships for our university students, research opportunities along the creek, and an expanded role for our School of Forest Resources." Penn State University is one of a growing list of institutions of higher learning who have recognized the benefits of partnership with CCCEEC, including Bryn Mawr College, Chestnut Hill College, Community College of Philadelphia, Drexel University, Haverford College, Juniata College, Lincoln University, Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine, University of the Sciences in Philadelphia, Temple University, University of Pennsylvania, and Ursinus College.

Financial support for the organization and its programs has come from government, corporate, foundation, and private sources. Critical to its survival was the confi-

dence expressed through contributions made during CCCEEC's earliest stages of development. PECO Energy Company, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and the U.S. Forest Service are listed among those agencies who supported this effort early on.

Wishing to build on their successes, and to help guide their transition from an "all volunteer" organization to a world class environmental education center, the board of directors has named a new executive director to oversee the operations of the CCCEEC, as the organization prepares to move into its new facility. Alan G. Fastman is well known in the political arena, business community, and amongst community leaders as an extremely efficient and effective administrator. Fastman left his position as Senior Staff Advisor for State Senator Anthony Williams on January 1, to join CCCEEC on a full-time basis. A Philadelphia native with roots in the Cobbs Creek community, Fastman is

currently a member of the board of Philadelphia United Community Development Corporation, a former director of the Organized Anti-Crime Community Network (OACCN), the Community Occupational Readiness and Placement Program, Inc. (CORPP), and the Helen Kate Furness Free Library. Fastman is an active Big Brother volunteer since 1975. In business for himself for most of his adult life, he brings over twenty-five years of managerial experience encompassing several disciplines of specific value to CCCEEC including for profit and not-for-profit business management, building construction, politics and government. He will oversee the construction project and build the organization's capacity to occupy its new home with the staff and programming that has long been the promise of the Cobbs Creek Community Environmental Education Center.