



September 28, 2006

Opinion: Things are looking up for Neighborhood Interfaith Movement

by George Stern

It often seems that newspaper columnists and reporters take the old saw, "No news is good news," all too seriously. It gives me great pleasure, then, to share some really good news with you. As executive director of Neighborhood (formerly Northwest) Interfaith Movement, I have had the pleasure recently of welcoming to our staff and community Anna Guarneri, one of the first 15 Philly Fellows.

Anna is an extraordinarily accomplished University of Pennsylvania grad, who completed her degree in history just this past May. Her campus and community activities included the Race Dialogue Project, the Penn Dance Company and Penn's Center for Community Partnership. She tutored at Drew Elementary School, served as a counselor in an arts camp program in her hometown of Oakland, Calif., and studied at the Université Gaston Berger in Senegal and the American School of Paris (she speaks French). She has taken courses in painting and drawing. She is a community organizer and multicultural enthusiast. And she is giving a year of her time and talent to NIM through the Philly Fellows program. We couldn't be happier.

The Philly Fellows program was started by two bright and entrepreneurial local grads who decided to do something positive about reports that say Philadelphia attracts thousands of students to its colleges and universities but does not retain many of them after graduation. Recent articles in the newspapers about Philadelphia's distressingly high poverty rate point to some of the reasons for the exodus of graduates, including a failure of creativity on the part of civic leaders to respond to the major economic changes that began eroding our job base in the 1950s. Unlike Boston and Chicago, Philadelphia has been slow to reinvent itself.

Tim Ifill, a native of Abington, and Matt Joyce, from Freeport, Maine, roommates at Haverford until their graduation in 2003, decided to do something about it. Thus was Philly Fellows born. This past summer they placed the first cohort of 15 area grads in local non-profits. NIM was one of the lucky ones among the 60 applicants (of course we are proud that we were chosen and grateful to all the people who have supported us for 37 years and made us into the exciting organization we have become).

Philly Fellows supporters include AmeriCorps*VISTA, The William Penn Foundation, PennSERVE: The Governor's Office of Citizen Service, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania: Department of Community and Economic

Development, The City of Philadelphia Department of Commerce, Roach Family Charities, The Patricia Kind Family Foundation, The Samuel S. Fels Fund, The Allen Hilles Fund, and Mt. Airy's own Ted and Stevie Wolf.

A number of corporations and organizations gave in-kind gifts, and, of course, Philly Fellows has many local smaller donors. NIM and the other recipients also contribute their own funds towards the project.

Quite exciting for me since we applied a year ago is to have met Matt and Tim, interviewed bright, enthusiastic students, and met with and spoken to some of Philly Fellows' creative and forward-thinking supporters like those listed above. Spending time with such folks renews my confidence in the potentials of this city. And, of course, the most exciting thing of all is to have welcomed our first-choice Philly Fellow candidate, Anna Guarneri, who started work on July 31.

In 2005 NIM completed a long and fruitful strategic plan. In January 2006 we launched the NIM Council, meant to serve as a gathering place and think tank for representatives of our 50 congregations and faith-based organizations. Our hope for the Council is that it will develop community programs through which the religious values we espouse will find public and effective expression.

Anna will help keep the Council moving, creating a delicate balance between community-based decision-making and staff-driven enthusiasm to get new initiatives started (we are fortunate to have a person capable of such a balancing act). Based on requests made at earlier meetings with congregational representatives and by clergy she has met with one-on-one, Anna has gotten commitments from several congregations to participate in a teen "service learning program" in which young people will learn about each others' faiths and engage in community projects together.

NIM is teaming with the Interfaith Center of Greater Philadelphia to make this program available at no cost to the congregations. She has also helped write a grant proposal to fund an anti-violence youth initiative that will teach teens how to engage in grassroots organizing to create the right atmosphere for real and systemic change.

You are more than welcome to add to this good news column by calling Anna at 215-843-5600, ext. 105, to learn more and lend your expertise.

George Stern is the executive director of Neighborhood Interfaith Movement (NIM), a coalition of fifty congregations and faith-based institutions now in its new home at 7047 Germantown Avenue.