

Empty Nesters Making a Home in Center City with the Help of “Friends”

By Robert Weiss

Forty-three years ago I moved into an exurban Chester County home on almost two acres, where I had proceeded to create a wonderful refuge from work—a 6,000 square foot vegetable garden. Several career changes later, and several marriages later, and after helping to care for aging and ill parents, Jane and I considered real retirement and a change in venue. Yes, we loved our life-style, but we were growing tired of the perpetual work, the home maintenance, and the warfare with the animals and insects and diseases wanting to win back our garden. There was much to love: the greenery and lovely vistas from high on our hill, the wonderful supply of organic vegetables and berries and herbs from April through November every year, the nightly fires all winter in our wood-burning stove, the screened-in back porch where we took all our summer meals, and hundreds of bottles of wine in a superlative cellar. But we were ready to seek a simpler way to live. I should add that I’m almost 75, and Jane’s not.

So we considered where to re-settle in down-sized mode. Jane and I talked about Manhattan, where we went regularly to opera and theater and gourmet food stores. Too large and unmanageable, we decided. Los Angeles, close to loved ones? Too many square miles to deal with, too dependent on automobile transport. Baltimore or Boston or Washington? Boston too cold, the others lovely East Coast cities but both too limited for our interests. Philadelphia seemed just perfect—walkable, culturally rich, food-conscious, and possessed of many available high-rises that might suit our needs. Besides, I was familiar, and so was Jane. A Philly native, I also had my college years here, and had taught here for several years, and Jane (a native Delaware Countian) had worked in Center City for several years.

Two years of Internet research by Jane led to our making an offer on an apartment in an older co-op building on Rittenhouse Square. We apparently passed review and went to settlement. We had no real sense of what we were getting into. All we knew is that we were committed to making a vast change, that we were leaving a wonderful semi-rural pleasure palace, and that we probably would never grill steaks or



The author readying the grill for steaks at the Schuylkill River Park Community Garden.

vegetables again, and that we didn’t know what we were in for.

Then some tough work began. We downsized seriously. Our task was to make 43 years of accumulated stuff disappear. First we carefully selected what few possessions we wanted to move with. Then we held a large estate auction for everything else: old furniture, antiques, garden equipment, tools, kitchen appliances and gadgets, art work, you name it. Virtually everything was sold off. The remainder, including thousands of books, was donated to non-profits.

Our new apartment was spacious, and all the things we brought with us helped to flesh out our new home: we still had our antique lamps and Caucasian rugs, our antique American table and cupboards, our Yamaha keyboard, and our Cuisinart. The walls hung most of our ancient rugs and original artwork. We began to get adjusted.

But we still knew not a soul except for two buddies from the past. How to proceed, we wondered. Our two cats took a while to get adjusted, and we occupied some of our time with them when one of them suffered serious depression and weight loss (after all, he had once ranged the fields

and caught snakes and humped his gal, and then we suddenly took him away from all of that). We knew many restaurants near the Kimmel Center because we already were orchestra subscribers, and we knew many places to go in Philly for food and entertainment. But would we find friends, things to do, and be able to build a satisfying and rich new life without knowing people to start with?

Luck was on our side. The day we met with our building’s Admission Committee we went out to dinner at a nearby restaurant, started chatting over wine, and looked up to discover a good friend of Jane’s who had married and now lived just two buildings away. A few weeks later I learned that an old work buddy had a place another few buildings away, and I contacted him for a lunch date. And then I bumped into some old friends of my sister who lived right in our building.

But the key stroke of luck was learning about a group of senior citizens we could join with, called Friends in the City (www.friendscentercity.org), who seemed to do interesting things and to provide a conduit for socializing with folks who were like-minded and similarly up in years. So we

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paid our dues and started to enjoy the activities provided through this group. We knew it was associated with the Religious Society of Friends, but in our opinion that was a plus since my daughter had attended a Friends' elementary school and Jane's mom had spent her last years in a Friends' nursing home. We appreciated all the good works done by the Friends and did not feel proselytized or uncomfortable in any way.

So what did we experience? Ethnic lunches once a month, a walk to the fish ladder along Martin Luther King Drive, Curtis music school concerts preceded by dinners

at Branzino, a tour of the Masonic Temple, a play-reading group, and more. Friends in the City, a new network for seniors, gave us a great way to meet people and learn more about what Philly has to offer.

And meanwhile, on our own, we've been discovering that we can still do a little gardening in a city plot, can locate a broader range of restaurants to our taste, can food-shop in several ethnic enclaves such as Chinatown, and can take advantage of more cultural opportunities than we had ever dreamed. No longer a necessity, our car got sold, and Zipcar

takes us where we want. Since we are both active walkers, we've happily embraced the Schuylkill River Banks trail and find any excuse to walk several miles in any direction from our new home. And while we know about SEPTA's free rides for seniors, we have yet to take one in seven months of downtown living.

And even grilling has become possible again! A few weeks ago we went with another couple to the Schuylkill River Park Community Garden, did up some pieces of chicken and some local asparagus, and knew we were at home.

Hunger Still Happens Every Day: Philabundance to the Rescue

By Bonnie Eisenfeld

In 1984, Pamela Rainey Lawler, a business communicator, read *Starving in the Shadow of Plenty* by Loretta Schwartz-Nobel, a book documenting hunger in America. Lawler learned that despite massive efforts to eradicate poverty, the problem not only persisted, but was growing. At the same time, Philadelphia was in the midst of a restaurant renaissance. Lawler, who dined out and entertained often, remembers that time: "I was increasingly disturbed by the disparity between my life and the life of so many others in the city."

Through her research, Lawler learned that about 300,000 people in the Delaware Valley -- elderly, children, and families, invisible to the public -- regularly went without food, while 20% of food prepared for human consumption was wasted. Restaurants, bakeries, and caterers had leftover useable food and were willing to donate it, but couldn't transport it. Agencies that fed the hungry -- shelters, soup kitchens, and emergency food pantries -- needed the food but couldn't pick it up. Transportation was the missing link.

To fill the gap and test the theory that perishable foods could be moved safely and efficiently, Lawler began driving her station wagon, providing timely pick-ups of surplus food along with containers and a legal protection agreement. Business owners who were early donors include: Judy Wicks of the White Dog; Kathleen Mulhern of the Garden Restaurant; Steve

Poses of Frog/Commissary; Lynn Buono and Skip Schwartzman of Feast Your Eyes catering; Reading Terminal Market merchants; PeachTree Caterers; and the Chef's Market. The new idea caught on. Armed with funds raised from the Jewish Federation, the Philadelphia Archdiocese, and a private donor, Lawler took her business background and entrepreneurial zeal and started Philabundance.

Within a year, Mitsubishi donated a refrigerated truck and Philabundance hired a paid driver. Volunteers worked as drivers and fundraisers and donated communications services as well as legal and logistical advice.

Lawler established Philabundance as a formal 501(c)(3) not-for-profit, and she mobilized the food industry to donate food on a regular basis and to participate in annual fund-raising events. Ten years later, in 1994, with two refrigerated trucks, a van, a lean staff, and a cadre of volunteers, Philabundance had delivered more than three million pounds of food to 120 agencies feeding the hungry.

Since that time, the number of people in this area without access to enough food each day has grown to 900,000 -- a quarter of them children. Growing numbers of working people are also joining the ranks of those in need of food. Today, Philabundance provides meals to 65,000 low-income hungry people every week through its member agencies.



Jim Graham, Graham Studios

Pamela Rainey Lawler, founder of Philabundance.

Philabundance opened a state-of-the-art food center in South Philadelphia to receive and distribute food and house a growing fleet of trucks. In 2005, Philabundance merged with the Greater Philadelphia Food Bank. Donated food from manufacturers, distributors, regional farms, the port, and community food drives accounts for about 85% of food distributed to 500 agencies: food cupboards, shelters, residential programs, social service agencies, emergency kitchens, and neighborhood distribution programs. Philabundance provides fresh produce, bread, dairy products, canned and packaged goods, and prepared foods with an emphasis on healthy