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The Barnes Files

A Civic-Minded Woman States the Case for the Barnes

By Margot Flaks

On January 17, 2007, Margot Flaks had the opportunity to address the Montgomery County Board of Commissioners regarding The Barnes Foundation. The Commissioners subsequently passed a resolution in support of the Barnes Foundation remaining permanently and intact in Merion. Here is Margot's address

I am Margot Flaks, a resident of Lower Merion Township and President of Merion Civic Association. I am also, along with more than a thousand other individuals, a member of Friends of the Barnes Foundation, an organization firmly convinced that the Barnes Foundation's best interests would be served by having its art collection remain where it has always been - in Merion.

The foundation has been an important presence in Merion, existing harmoniously with the neighbors and the educational institutions in the area for more than seventy years until Miss D'Mazia's death. Dr. Barnes himself became a resident in 1905 when he built an imposing stone home on a tract of land, now a part of Episcopal Academy's campus. Occupied with business affairs, amassing the paintings which would provide the basis for his world renowned collection of art, developing a philosophy of art and art education, he nevertheless, found time to become involved with community affairs as he urged the newly formed Merion Civic Association to take steps to remedy the unhealthy sewage conditions of Latch's Lane and later, as he pressed that same organization to address the issue of safe drinking water, warning Edward Bok, the Association's president, that the possibilities for an epidemic were great.

Dr. Barnes could have placed his Foundation anywhere, but chose the area where he lived and where he also built and renovated several houses as part of an effort to maintain a certain quality and integrity in the neighborhood. In developing the galleries to house his collection, he engaged the services of the renowned architect, Paul Phillippe Cret, commissioned Henri Matisse to paint the dancing figures which adorn the great entrance hall, and had Jacques Lipschutz execute the sculptures on the outside of the building. Under the auspices of Mrs. Barnes, the arboretum, already a part of the property, was enlarged and developed in such a manner as to enhance and compliment the art within the galleries. The building, the galleries, the dazzling collection of art, and the beautifully designed gardens all work together to provide the visitor an incomparable artistic experience.

We believe, as do a large number of art critics and art historians that moving the Barnes Foundation would be an unpardonable aesthetic crime. It is highly unlikely that the building with its serene setting and its atmosphere of calm, thoughtful contemplation would be duplicated on the Parkway. Its Merion location is as much a part of the Barnes as its art and there is no other place quite like it. Once destroyed, there can be no willing it back. Will we ask a few years from now why more was not done to save it?

We ask that you consider carefully what will be lost if the Barnes is forced to relocate. It will not be simply Merion's or Montgomery County's loss but a loss to the world of art as well. No one would dream of moving the Isabelle Stewart Gardner museum to downtown Boston, or the Frick collection to the Metropolitan or the Sir John Soanes in London to the National Gallery. Small institutions with their collections representing the beliefs and aesthetic of one individual are valuable not only in an artistic

sense, but also for their ability to convey a piece of social history. It is highly unlikely that such an art collection or building could be duplicated today.

Judge Stanley Ott has given permission for the Barnes Foundation to move, but has not mandated that it do so and indeed he questioned whether the move, would in the end, solve its financial difficulties. We ask then, that the Commissioners join with the Lower Merion Commissioners, the Merion Civic Association, the Friends of the Barnes Foundation, and the many art lovers throughout the country as we strive to convince the board members of the Barnes to seek other alternatives. Let us work together to keep the Barnes in its entirety in Merion where it belongs.

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Margot Flaks is a resident of Merion, President of the Merion Civic Association, and a member Friends of the Barnes Foundation. For further information, visit www.barnesfriends.org