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The Barnes Files

Trouble in Merion: '*Hostile*' Neighbors or Concerned Citizens?

by Evelyn Yaari

In June of last year, I joined Friends of the Barnes Foundation, the organization opposing the plan to move the artwork of the Barnes from Merion to Philadelphia and decided to throw myself into a personal “street” campaign to inform my fellow citizens with a printed handout. After several encouraging encounters with local business people one morning, I approached a woman on a street in Narberth. After reading the handout, she exploded in a burst of anger, shouting at me that she knows all about it, she is very upset; but it is too late. Those *neighbors* (of the Barnes Foundation on North Latch’s Lane) should have realized that “actions have consequences!” I felt a combination of shock and puzzlement. The idea that people thought the neighbors’ actions had determined the plan to move the artwork from its home in Merion to Philadelphia baffled me and I wanted to learn more...

Newspaper accounts on this topic overwhelmingly and repeatedly characterize the Barnes neighbors as being hostile; however, that description is inconsistent with the facts reported in books and directly from the neighbors themselves. On the contrary, local residents treasure the Barnes Foundation. After all, their preference to be a neighbor of the Barnes is clear by their purchases of the surrounding homes. There is considerable evidence that the “hostile neighborhood” is a useful, but baseless myth spread by those claiming that the institution must move from Merion in order to survive. It is a classic, manipulative “Big Lie.”

In the mid-1990s, after more than seventy tranquil years as neighbors of one another, the Barnes Foundation, under President of the Board Richard Glanton, and residents of Latch’s Lane had conflicting goals. Mr. Glanton wanted to create a different path for the Barnes Foundation. For him, streets full of tour buses and taxis bringing an unlimited number of visitors were key to this plan. For the residents of Latch’s Lane, interstate busses spewing diesel fumes for hours, impromptu taxicab stands, Barnes visitors picnicking and parking on private property were creating an intolerable situation and they protested. Does that make them hostile? Wouldn’t residents of any neighborhood have protested under such circumstances? Newspapers often carry stories of “active,” “concerned,” “unhappy” neighbors protesting undesirable events in their neighborhoods; yet strangely in the case of the Barnes neighbors, the word “hostility” is persistently -- and inaccurately --used to describe them.

The neighbors’ objections were met by a Federal Law Suit initiated by Richard Glanton. The term given to this sort of lawsuit is SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation) – and this suit was dismissed in the neighbors’ favor and labeled “cynical and frivolous” by the 3rd Circuit. **The neighbors have never sued the Barnes Foundation.** Given the institution’s financial condition, it was surprising to learn that the Barnes paid over \$1.4 million appealing the payment of the legal fees involved which were under \$100,000. (Some nine years later, the fees were partially reimbursed.)

Today, interstate busses no longer idle on Latch’s Lane and there is a balance between the institution’s needs and those of its neighborhood. **The fact is, the difficulties between the Barnes Foundation management and the immediate neighbors took place more than ten years ago, yet the myth of ongoing “hostility” persists.** Today, many neighbors are involved in opposing the planned move of the artwork of the Barnes to Philadelphia along with over a thousand members of

Friends of the Barnes Foundation (www.barnesfriends.org) from across the country and around the world. Their position is echoed by every local civic group as well as public officials in the Township and Montgomery County. They have proposed to the Barnes Foundation Board of Trustees and the Township of Lower Merion a detailed, workable plan for the Barnes not only to remain, but to thrive on Latch's Lane. Their plan is dedicated to preserving the legacy of Albert Barnes and his Foundation in its home in Merion. Now those are good neighbors.

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