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Paradise Under the El



ON THE RIGHT TRACK: Fishtown may have a bad rep, but things are looking up thanks to strong civic pride and community involvement. Photo By: Michael T. Regan

New Kensington CDC made me a Philadelphian.

by Sue Sierra

It was a fall day, about six months after I'd moved to town. I was driving out Frankford Avenue, through a section of the city I hadn't seen before, and suddenly I noticed changes. Instead of thigh-high weeds and piles of trash, vacant lots were clean, grassy and planted with trees around the edges. I passed community gardens and a stunning quasi-Cubist mural on the side of a building.

"What's this neighborhood called?" I asked. "I think this is Fishtown," said my passenger. "Wow," I said. "I think I like Philadelphia."

So on a recent day I was glad to be taking the eastbound El to meet Sandy Salzman for a neighborhood tour. Salzman is the director of New Kensington Community Development Corporation, the neighborhood organization that cleaned the lot, got the gardens started and arranged for the mural to be painted. New Kensington also rehabs vacant housing in the neighborhood, organizes residents and does economic development.

The view from the El tracks looking east reveals countless four-story brick buildings: the ghosts of industrial Philadelphia. Once mills employing thousands, most are now vacant. Some are used as storage, or first-floor retail with empty upper stories. A few functioning manufacturers defy the trend.

The loss of jobs and people has left more than 1,500 vacant lots in Kensington, Port Richmond and Fishtown. New Kensington has worked with neighbors and Philadelphia Green for the past seven years to transform the eyesores into community assets. They've created 38 gardens, stabilized 600 parcels of vacant land and channeled almost 200 lots to neighbors for side yards. The program is so successful it's now a national model for urban greening.

My first stop with Salzman is a pint-sized garden set behind a dramatic wooden archway. She reaches over the fence and picks a bunch of nearly ripe cherries from a dangling branch. The neighbors designed and maintain the garden with support from New Kensington staff, and at first most wanted a flower patch. "But Tong down the street is from Vietnam, where you grow food wherever you can," Sandy explains. Tong convinced his neighbors to plant fruit trees instead. Nobody's been sorry.

Next we're off to the neighborhood farm. "Farm?" I ask. Yes, right here in Philadelphia. Six years ago, New Kensington recruited Greensgrow Farm to Kensington when they found out its owner, Mary Corboy, was seeking a site in the city to raise hydroponic lettuce. The lot is a former Superfund site, safe for this reuse because the vegetables are grown in water. Greensgrow raises 14 kinds of specialty lettuce, as well as wholesale and retail flowers and plants. There's a small farm market going on, and I can't resist buying a few heirloom tomato plants and a quart of what I discover are the best strawberries I've tasted in years.

Leaving Greensgrow, we head back to Frankford Avenue, to a thick hedge of captivating deep red roses stretching all the way around a corner lot. We drift our car to the side and get out by a sign telling us: "Welcome to Fishtown -- Stop and Smell the Roses."



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Belgrade Garden is Ed Elliss. Elliss, retired from running a small grocery store, says it was a vacant lot, plagued by short dumping. When I ask him what he can tell me, he says, "Weeds taller than me, that's a fact." People taking scrap to clean up the junkyard's rejects on the lot. Short dumpers left it piled with

Five years of work by Elliss, his wife, Loretta and his neighbors have gone into the Belgrade Garden. Now the roses screen the garden from the street, creating quiet and seclusion. The small gazebo is a popular backdrop for wedding and prom photos. Neighbors come out in the evening to garden, clip roses or read in the park.

Elliss is a passionate garden evangelist. As I'm leaving, he encourages me, "You don't need to spend a lot of money. A person who goes out and buys a \$1.40 plant to put in the window -- that plant is like a smile. Put the plant outside your door and it's an invitation, telling you to come, sit down and take a rest."

Elliss' enthusiasm and determination seem to speak for his neighborhood. As I head out of Fishtown, I look back from the El. The vacant mills and factories are still there, but I can't help thinking that life doesn't get much better than this: standing on the Girard El platform, looking back toward the Delaware over buildings and gardens, eating fresh, warm cherries on a hot spring day.

Sue Sierra is policy coordinator for the Philadelphia Association of Community Development Corporations.



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