

Whenever Philadelphia comes up in the news, it's bound to be for a bad reason. Philadelphia has a lot of crime, that's no lie - Philadelphia being the Murder Capital is a thing I refuse to ignore, and *oh* do I enjoy pointing it out at the first opportunity - but when seeing such doom and gloom all the time, we forget that Philadelphia actually has decent people trying to do things for the good of the community. Just in Fishtown, there's a lot of exciting and heartwarming things going on that could



make a person believe that maybe Philadelphia isn't all that bad. Or, at least, it's not *entirely* bad. Still the murder capital, that's still a thing. The point here is, good stuff happens in Philadelphia sometimes, amidst all of the killing and crime. I'm going to talk a bit about that here.

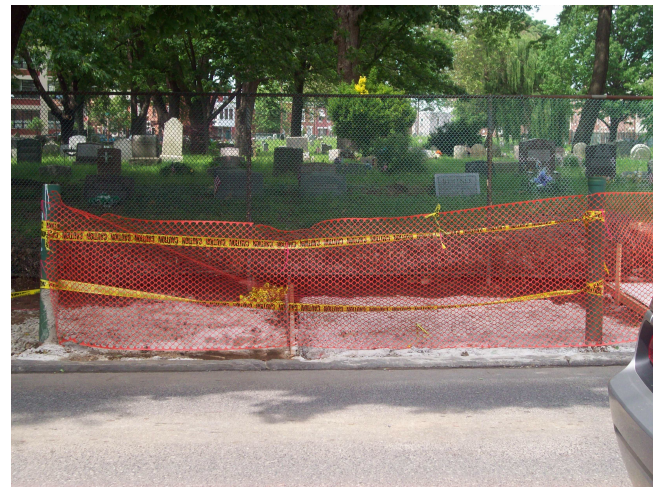
It's a decent assumption that the youth of today is either criminal or uninterested in their community (that is, of course, what the news tends to believe/report). However, there are many younger people very interested in the quality of their community, and a large number of people overall who would gladly work to improve their neighborhood without compensation, going so far as to do things that should, for all intents and purposes, be rewarded with a (sometimes substantial) amount of money. Right around my house in Fishtown, there are *tons* of things going on. I suppose it's an added bonus that quite a bit of history surrounds one of these "things," history which I am very happy to discuss (as I am, after all, fond of history).



Right down the street from my house is Palmer Cemetery. It was founded in 1732 by Anthony Palmer, English merchant/businessman/colonial governor. The cemetery was opened up to all residents of the Fishtown-Kensington area by his daughter in 1749, as it was his wish to provide this land for all residents of his

town. It holds a number of soldiers from wars as old as the Revolutionary. The cemetery also contains people such as a Native American chief. Palmer himself is not buried in Palmer Cemetery, even though it was originally set for Palmer's family. The thing about this cemetery that sets itself apart from several other cemeteries is that Palmer Cemetery was founded with the intent of providing free plots to residents of the area. This never changed: Palmer Cemetery is still (theoretically) free to all residents. I say "theoretically" because, as expected of a very old cemetery, *Palmer is full*. Palmer Cemetery is no longer burying people, since there simply isn't enough room for them anymore. Palmer Cemetery is not useless, however: it is an important historical site and a testament that the neighborhood still cares about their history.

There is a group of people devoted to the upkeep of the Palmer Cemetery, called (appropriately enough) the Friends of Palmer Cemetery. If not for those fine people, the cemetery would have fallen into (even more) disrepair and would likely be forgotten (the group itself suggests that much). These people are doing their best to keep Palmer Cemetery pleasant and wonderful. It's entirely volunteer work. Years ago, the committee occasionally organized cleanups of the cemetery (and by "occasionally," I mean "almost never"). A year or two ago, the vice president, a man named Jim Kingsmill took over. The committee now has a website and an increased number of cleanups, but that's not all: Kingsmill



collects donations, appeals to businesses for grants to improve the cemetery, supplied the cemetery with new tools from this money, and then started to get some major work done on the cemetery. In addition to being more frequent, cleanups have increased in scope: they're not just picking up trash inside of the cemetery anymore, they're also handling the vine growth on the fences, weeds, and trash and leaves outside the cemetery. In addition to this, a large number of volunteers have taken it upon themselves to *completely replace the sidewalk surrounding the cemetery*. When I saw them a year or so ago, I thought perhaps Kingsmill had hired people from the city to do it (they first showed up in roughly the same timeframe that workers hired by the city were replacing sidewalks near Front and Girard), but no: it was a team of volunteers, breaking up the old concrete by hand and replacing it by hand. They're doing one side of the block each year. Admittedly, they are paid for this work: the volunteers themselves happily took it upon themselves to do this without pay, but Kingsmill still had money from various grants that he needed to spend, so he pays the volunteers for their efforts.

The most noteworthy thing about the work done by the Friends of Palmer Cemetery is the age of its average participants. While children obviously cannot be replacing sidewalks, *many of the volunteers in the cleanups are children*. At first I suspected they were forced to come out to the cemetery to do work, but some of them came alone and nearly none of them had a disposition that suggested they were forced to be there. It's

truly a heartwarming thing to see so many young people interested in their community, and even more that they're invested in a cemetery. You know, the fairly dull and macabre place with the dead people.



Two blocks down from Palmer Cemetery is Fishtown's recreation center, which has a number of different services. First, it's a playground: children from at *least* two schools in the area go to the playground as part of their physical education programs, since their gyms are either inadequate or nonexistent. Children also go to the playground on their own time. Several sports events are hosted on the grounds as well, since there is a large area set up for a

variety of games to be played. There is also a building on the grounds (that is, the *actual* "Recreation Center") that, in addition to being a preschool and a former meeting place for a Boy Scouts-like group, hosts the meetings of the Fishtown Neighbors Association. The Fishtown Neighbors Association is made up of *many* younger people: not young-young like the children in the cemetery, but still decently young. I once attended one of their meetings. They're all very friendly people and I got the impression that they all appear quite close, in stark contrast to the usual image of Philadelphia being rude and irritable and everybody being suspicious of each other (with good reason, since *it is the murder capital*).

The Neighbors Association also has a website, where they provide a calendar of their events, information on its leaders, information about zoning, and several other resources. On their website, they claim their mission is "to serve our families and neighbors by promoting community activities, civic involvement, education, and safety and by fostering the smart growth of our unique and diverse riverfront neighborhood. This is an admirable mission, and I can confirm that the Association is true to their beliefs. Fishtown has a *lot* of events, particularly near the summer, and many of them are the result of the Fishtown Neighbors



Association's planning and efforts. Without these young people around to keep the Fishtown community active, I'm sure it would be much less pleasant than it is.



The Neighbors Association also helps businesses in the Fishtown area. When attending one of their meetings, I learned that a portion of their meeting is devoted to promoting businesses in the neighborhood, and representatives of these businesses attend to talk about what their business is. Keep in mind that, while Fishtown was once the heavy-industry part of Kensington, it's now essentially a town in the middle of the city and *all of these businesses are family owned and run*. They *rely* on our support to keep going, since they're

not a franchise. They're just a single person, maybe their kids or significant other, running businesses like dog grooming or a bakery of some sort. It's respectable that the Neighbors Association gives their time to support these businesses and keep them running.

Fishtown is a special little place in that it has significantly less crime. Fishtown's population could best be described as "old people" and "new hipsters." They don't exactly get along, but when the community comes together to improve the area, I can see that they are able to work together and they'll all be interested in the common goal of making Fishtown a much more pleasant place. This is far, far different than the usual image of Philadelphia, where the people are violent, selfish, and malevolent. I don't *like* Philadelphia, no (it's the murder capital, if I haven't mentioned that) and I'm *very* eager to get out, but Fishtown is a lot like the diamond in the rough and it gives me hope that maybe this city isn't the worst place in America.