

Hillcrest Community Civic Association

20 years of Inspired Civic Leadership: The Cradle of DC Mayors

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To mark its 20th anniversary, HCCA hosted a panel of presidents Sept. 5. (L-R) Current president Karen L. Williams, and past presidents Vincent Spaulding, Pastor Franklin Senger III and Paul Savage.

Ward 7 resident Carrie Thornhill said recently, “We conveyed two priority themes our members wanted to promote about our neighborhood and association: that Hillcrest is best known internally for its neighborliness, collegiality and warmth of its residents. And it is best known externally for its civic involvement, civil discourse and civic activism. The community told us what they wanted, we gave them that which they asked and they supported it.”

Thornhill was referring to the Hillcrest Community Civic Association (HCCA), which celebrated 20 years in September. For the occasion, HCCA

hosted a panel of HCCA presidents, for former and the current president, Karen Williams, to discuss the association’s past and future; a blessing of the trees festival; and on Sept. 12, an anniversary lunch at the Hillcrest Recreation Center.

“We exceeded our own expectations,” said Thornhill, who chaired the anniversary committee and is a board member. “The general consensus was the event went well; it was a real community happening in our own neighborhood with a ‘touch of class.’”

Beyond the elegance, the event attracted heavyweights in DC’s political arena, including DC Council Chair Vincent Gray, a Hillcrest resident; Councilmembers Yvette Alexander

(Ward 7) and Muriel Bowser (Ward 4), and At-Large Councilmembers David Catania and Phil Mendelson. The council declared September HCCA month.

However, the highlight of the three-hour event was the keynote speaker, former District Mayor Anthony A. Williams. Drafted by HCCA for the mayoral run in 1999, Williams remarked that as the city continues to evolve, Hillcrest should keep its voice clear on the importance of investing in the city’s future.

“Push the envelope. It’s important for residents to work with other groups to finance HCCA projects around the city,” he said, commending HCCA for “holding public officials accountable.” He said every public official who wanted

to hold on to that position, or to elevate, needed to pay homage to Hillcrest.

Former HCCA president Vincent Spaulding agreed.

During the Sept. 5 presidents’ panel, Spaulding said HCCA had big picture thinkers in key leadership positions who understood how government worked.

“HCCA has been successful in addressing issues with the mayor, council and District agency directors,” in positions to make changes benefiting the community, he said.

One District weekly thought so.

In a political story on Gray, Michael DeBonis, aka Loose Lips, wrote, “not only is Hillcrest the location of Gray’s home and his political base, but it’s a locale with a reputation for sussing out political talent. Ground zero of the Anthony A. Williams draft campaign! Cradle of DC mayors!”

For 20 years, the HCCA held on to its reputation as a “community of progressive thinkers, dignified and respectful of each other and guests at community meetings,” according to Spaulding. From its accomplishments, HCCA has done well, he said. “The concern now is how well will we do in the future?”

The History

In the past, HCCA did not have its current reputation. Established late 1989, HCCA was created for Hillcrest residents to promote their neighborhood’s welfare and to give them a voice. HCCA’s purpose was to voice concerns to government officials, businesses and residents to ensure the best possible living environment in Hillcrest, according to the website. HCCA addressed police and fire protection, leaf and refuse collection, snow removal, traffic lights, education, health, housing and beautification.

The organization started after a letter was circulated in 1989 by former Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner for 7B05 Belva T. Simmons, asking residents to form “an organization to speak with a concerted voice about our problems and needs.” She said neighborhood organizations were useful, and Hillcrest was the only “geographically designated” community in Ward

7 without a viable one.

Residents heeded the call. On Aug. 2, 1989, about 60 met on the lawn of longtime residents Dennis and Gloria Logan for the Neighborhood Watch Night Out to discuss reviving the neighborhood organization. Residents were enthusiastic, and HCCA held its first meeting at 10 a.m., Sept. 30, 1989, at the Lutheran Church of the Holy Comforter at Branch and Alabama avenues SE.

About 30 attended. They sought to ensure government-provided services based on need, a positive image of Hillcrest, help neighbors keep the image standard, and create a congenial neighborhood atmosphere, a crime prevention measure as neighbors look out for each other. They supported educational and social development of their youth.

The association's name was selected December 1989. The title is a combination of a motion by Lutheran Church Pastor Franklin Senger III for "community," and William Clark for "civic." The group voted to meet the first Saturday of each month.

Longtime Hillcrest resident and activist Philip Hammond, an organizing member and supervisor for the Department of Public Works, was the principal speaker.

The Accomplishments

From then, the now-deceased Simmons, author of the letter, was elected as the first president and served 1989-1992. She was credited for laying the foundation on which HCCA has prospered for 20 years.

Paul Savage was next, from 1993-1995. Under his leadership, HCCA began the home and garden tour, and the newsletter. The Goodhope Marketplace Quality Oversight Committee was established, and he pushed for traffic calming. He still continues to do so. Senger III was next, and served from 1996-2001. HCCA began working with the DC Office on Aging to bring the Washington Seniors Wellness Center to Hillcrest. The website began operations in 2000 and is now a national model. HCCA began its partnership with Palisades Civic Asso-



(L-R) Karen L. Williams, Vincent Spaulding, Pastor Franklin Senger III, Paul Savage and First Vice President Marvin Bowser.

ciation in Ward 3 and created Neighbors Through Arts. During this time, the Williams-for-mayor movement started that led to the city's rebirth.

Spaulding was elected fourth president and served 2002-2006. HCCA pushed for a new recreation center and led the redevelopment of Skyland Shopping Center. It worked with the council to get approval for \$40 million in city financing. Spaulding established a zero-tolerance policy for illegal signs and posters in public spaces and established the Strategic Communications Committee. The listserv was created 2005. Membership grew to 544.

Current president Karen Williams first served as secretary. Elected 2007, under her leadership, HCCA's boundaries were formalized; it modernized its mission; and through the education and environment committees, it expanded relations with the three neighborhood public schools. The monthly councilmember roundtable and the blessing of the trees were established. The Streets, Traffic and Transportation Committee was created, and the government approved, funded and launched the replacement of the 11th Street Bridges. The 20th anniversary celebration was under her watch.

"As the enormity of the occasion became a reality, I felt a sense of pride to be fortunate enough to be the reigning president of such an important organization," said Williams, who added that the current board remained true to HCCA's original vision. "I'm grateful to every HCCA member who worked so hard to pull off the celebration."

Besides these accomplishments, HCCA has bragged about lead-

ing the charge to stop news outlets from indicting east Washington any time something negative occurred in Southeast. The result was that more news outlets began identifying specific neighborhoods where events occurred.

Hillcrest, branded as Washington, DC's "Best Kept Secret," recently helped elect three Ward 7 neighbors to serve on the council simultaneously. HCCA has established one of the best Neighborhood Watch programs, working with 6D Metropolitan Police Department.

20 Years and Counting

About the anniversary lunch, Thornhill said the committee was "very pleased with the outcome in terms of the cross-section of neighbors attending, the moral and tangible support of seven councilmembers, the program stayed on time, the speakers, meal, music, slide show, souvenir booklet and presentations of awards were nothing less than outstanding. The anniversary also came in under budget even after the purchase of the podium public address system as a gift to the community."

Although HCCA's original members are still engaged, she said she needed to commend the younger, more recent residents.

"The next generation of HCCA leadership is absolutely stepping up," she said. There are several examples including: the anniversary's mistress of ceremonies who served as treasurer for several years. The current first vice president stepped up from chairing the Garden Tour and Communications Committee. A member of recreation now chairs the Education and Recreation Committee;

and the HCCA newsletter editor also chairs communications.

"What is especially good about the new leadership is that not only are they talented, willing to share their talents, and have high community values, but they also work well with the seasoned leaders," Thornhill added. "The collegial mix is what makes things work well now and bodes well for the future."

HCCA's original members who are still involved include Mary Hammond, a member since 1990, who founded the garden tour

and continues to work on environmental issues and the trees festival. John Hawkins, since 1989, has served as parliamentarian, and now chaplain. He has rarely missed a meeting in 20 years. Willard Poteat, member since 1992, has served until recently as information chair since 1993. He chaired the Good Hope Marketplace Taskforce since the center was built. These longstanding members were recognized at the lunch.

"With our present board of directors and concerned members, we are continuing to network to improve the community," said longtime resident, Gloria Logan, HCCA's archivist and historian. "HCCA is still focused on its mission and continually working toward that. We're now forming a committee to make sure that blight is not creeping into the neighborhood with vacant houses and houses in disrepair."

Spaulding suggested that for HCCA to continue the next 20 years and beyond, it needs to consider hiring a professional to do a demographic study of Hillcrest to help determine the talent pool in the community.

"To assist the community in addressing change, HCCA leaders must find a way to shape public opinion and shape people around important issues and lead them and guide them without causing hard feelings or bullying them," Spaulding said. "A good dose of out-of-the-box thinking and leadership will result in the future of HCCA being just as bright as it was for the past 20 years."

For more information, visit HCCA's website at www.hillcrestdc.com. ★