

## **2015 Annual Report**

### **Executive Director Andrew Berman**

Good evening everyone, and welcome to GVSHP's 35<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting and our 25<sup>th</sup> Village Awards. Over the past 25 years, we have had the pleasure of honoring some really wonderful people, places, and institutions with our Village Awards – some of which, sadly, are no longer with us, while others continue to thrive and grow.

I'd like to thank our very generous co-hosts for this evening, The New School, and our wonderful Awards Committee for their terrific work in selecting this year's honorees from hundreds of worthy nominations. I'd also like to thank GVSHP's incredibly hard-working staff – Sam Moskowitz, Ted Mineau, Karen Loew, Amanda Davis, and two new staff members, Lauren Snetiker and Matthew Morowitz. And I'd like to extend a special acknowledgement to all the GVSHP Trustees here tonight, whose generosity with their time and talent make what we do possible.

But before we get to our Awards program and our election of Trustees, it's my distinct pleasure to provide you with a review of GVSHP's activities and accomplishments over the past year.

In May, GVSHP staged its major annual benefit, our highly-anticipated Spring House tour. This year's tour was blessed with beautiful weather, and was our highest-grossing benefit ever. Hundreds of tour-goers got exclusive access to some of the most striking and appealing private homes in the Village, the doors of which were generously opened for the afternoon by their owners. The event raised nearly a quarter of GVSHP's annual budget, and was made possible by an incredibly hard-working committee, including longtime outgoing co-chair Leslie Mason, and more than 130 volunteers and a dozen generous businesses.

This was just one of many forms of support GVSHP received over the past year. Membership support, which comprises about 70% of our annual income, rose by over 30% in the past year. Over the past dozen years, the number of our members has grown by 250%, while membership support has increased by almost 700%.

New members come to GVSHP through a variety of means, one of which is our ever-changing and expanding programming. This past year GVSHP conducted 57 public programs, attended by nearly 4,000 people – a nearly 25% increase over last year’s already impressive numbers. Almost all of our programs are free and, with the exception of our members-only events, open to the public. These ranged from programs explaining how to research the history of your building, to the origins of the Whitney Museum in Greenwich Village; from a tour of East Village Community gardens, to a remembrance of West 14th Street’s Little Spain district. We held panel discussions about restaurant preservation and one-on-one conversations about the state of historic preservation; we looked at the incredible historic photos of Robert Otter and Fred McDarrah, and the Red-Tailed Hawks of Washington and Tompkins Squares. We also did wonderful programs with food critic and writer Mimi Sheraton and artist Frederick Brosen – both contributors to our book, ***Greenwich Village Stories***, which is available for sale here tonight.

We also continued our highly popular historic plaque program in partnership with the Two Boots Foundation. This past October we added a plaque to the front of the former Fillmore East on Second Avenue, where we were joined by musician Lenny Kaye and by Joshua White, the man behind the Fillmore's legendary "Joshua Light Show." Tomorrow night at 6pm we will be adding a plaque to the site of Martha Graham's dance studio of the 1930's and 40's at 13<sup>th</sup> Street and 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, and plans are in the works for a plaque marking James Baldwin's former residence on Horatio Street in the fall.

Meanwhile, with the help of the GVSHP Broker Partnership, we expanded our Continuing Education Program for real estate professionals. Through this program we educate brokers and realtors about the history of our communities and the value of preservation. Given the critical role these professionals play in shaping our neighborhood, this education pays invaluable dividends. The partnership also staged a very successful Comedy Night fundraiser for GVSHP in March, which also raised funds towards a scholarship named for former Partnership Co-Chair Rebecca Ritter Daniels, whom we lost quite suddenly earlier this year.

Over the past year, demand for GVSHP's Children's Education program surged, as more schools from across the five boroughs enrolled in the program which serves children in grades one thru seven, using in-class sessions and a tour of the Village to teach about immigrant history, urban development, and 19<sup>th</sup> century life in New York. Nearly half of the students who enrolled in the program qualified for need-based scholarships from GVSHP, allowing them to participate for free. Our children's education program, like our general programming, is made possible by a combination of government and private grants, but the single largest source of support for these programs is membership contributions.

GVSHP has also been expanding our social media presence, to engage and mobilize a broader audience. In the past year our Facebook reach has grown by 20%, our Twitter following has grown by 30%, and the viewership of our YouTube page has grown by more than 2 ½ times. The last especially is no surprise; you can now view a video of almost every program GVSHP conducts on our YouTube page, as well as videos of Landmarks Preservation Commission hearings on items in our neighborhood. So if you missed one of our lectures or panels, or want to find out exactly why the LPC approved a new addition on your block, our YouTube page is the place to go.

Meanwhile our website continues to attract users from across the globe. In the past year it drew nearly 400,000 pageviews from nearly 300,000 unique visitors, with our blog, Off the Grid, receiving 212,000 pageviews from nearly 178,000 unique visitors. Since its start in 2011, our most popular blog post, about the artists Andy Warhol, has now had nearly 40,000 page views.

Our on-line presence has also been a great tool for helping local residents learn about what's going on every day in our neighborhoods, and how to get involved. Our Landmarks Application Webpage is the first of its kind in the city, providing invaluable information about every single public hearing application for a change to a landmarked building in our neighborhoods. It provides the history of the building, the proposed changes, when and where the application will be heard by the Community Board and the Landmarks Preservation Commission, and how you can give in-person, e-mailed, or written testimony before a decision is made. It tracks the application, in some cases for years, from its first filing to its resolution, letting you know of any modifications to the application, new meetings that have been scheduled or decisions rendered, and allows you to sign up for alerts to update you on all such developments.

In the last year, this webpage has received over 22,000 pageviews from more than 16,000 unique visitors, making this an incredibly valuable and widely-used resource.

Of course we don't just let the public know about these applications; GVSHP carefully reviews every single one of them ourselves, and when appropriate, issues alerts to our members and advocates to the Community Board and Landmarks Preservation Commission for what we believe is the right outcome. In the past year, our Preservation Committee reviewed 93 such landmarks applications, in nearly every corner of our neighborhood, ranging from storefront alterations to demolition and new construction. Our input, and that of the public which we helped facilitate, clearly impacted the outcome of many of these applications. And on a daily basis, GVSHP monitors every single one of the over 6,500 buildings in our neighborhood for any new demolition or construction permits, so we can be sure to take swift action in response if needed.

Landmarks applications were not the only place GVSHP was able to have an impact. In late 2014, the Landmarks Preservation Commission put forward a plan to decalendar, or drop from consideration, about a hundred potential landmarks throughout the five boroughs, including four in our neighborhood. GVSHP and our fellow preservationists quickly rallied against the plan and called for alternative means for the city to address its backlog of sites awaiting a final determination on landmark designation. The City soon after dropped the plan.

Not yet dropped is the City's plan for a citywide zoning change which would increase the allowable height of new development in residential neighborhoods, especially those in "contextual districts" – areas with special restrictions meant to preserve the scale and character of neighborhoods. GVSHP fought hard to secure such rules in the Far West and East Village, but the city's plan would increase the allowable height limits in those areas by anywhere from just under 10% to over 31%.

Though a citywide issue, I am proud to say that GVSHP has led the charge against this plan, and in May the City pulled back somewhat on the proposal, but not enough. Most of the proposed height limit increases remain in place, and as this plan goes through the public hearing and review process this fall before Community Boards, Borough Presidents, and the City Council, GVSHP will be there to fight hard to maintain our zoning protections.

In fact, GVSHP is fighting to expand such zoning protections in places like the South Village and the University Place/Broadway corridors. In each, current zoning allows the construction of towers 300 feet in height or greater. And sadly, this is no longer just a theoretical threat; a developer has filed plans for a 308 ft tall tower on the site of Bowlmor Lanes at University Place and 12<sup>th</sup> Street, and that planned development could get even larger. GVSHP has submitted proposals for new zoning with more appropriate height limits for both these areas, which have garnered strong support from the local community and elected officials. However, the City, which must approve any such rezoning, has thus far been non-committal on both. And so we are working with local elected officials to increase the pressure and get the City to act.

Over the last year we have seen a few notable examples where the City has been willing to act, in some cases after considerable waits. Late last year the City landmarked the 1866 Town & Village Synagogue on East 14<sup>th</sup>, a building which had been calendared, or under consideration for landmark designation, since 1966. GVSHP spearheaded the successful campaign to get the City to finally designate after it came to light that the site was being marketed for sale and potential development.

And just earlier this month, the City finally agreed to consider a proposal put forward by GVSHP to individually landmark the West Village's Stonewall Inn, internationally recognized as the birthplace of the modern gay and lesbian civil rights movement. Though given historic designation by the State of New York and the federal government back in 1999 (also in response to an application from GVSHP and others), the City had been slow to move. Since only City landmarking, not state or federal historic designation, actually preserves a building, GVSHP pushed hard to get the new administration to move on Stonewall. And we have also put forward three other sites in our neighborhood connected to this important civil rights movement for consideration for landmark designation.

Stonewall's hearing before the Landmarks Preservation Commission will take place next Tuesday.

Just two weeks ago another important hearing for the future of our neighborhood took place in the Court of Appeals in Albany, where the State's highest court heard GVSHP's and our co-plaintiff's lawsuit challenging the City's approval of the massive, 20 year, 2 million square foot NYU expansion plan. We were elated in early 2014 when a State Supreme Court Justice agreed with our suit and struck down an important component of the plan. But we were disappointed when the de Blasio administration joined NYU in appealing the decision, which was then overturned. The Court of Appeals could have let that decision stand, but instead chose to hear our appeal, which was supported by a broad array of civic, parks and good government groups, and a bi-partisan coalition of State legislators. A decision is expected as early as July.

We will likely be waiting longer for a decision regarding the sale of "air rights" from the Hudson River Park. This scheme was intended to generate money for completion of the park, albeit at the expense of allowing larger development on adjacent inland blocks. We did score a big victory last fall when Governor Cuomo

dropped a plan to allow such sales without it going through the City's public review process. But the potential for millions of square feet of additional development being added to our neighborhoods remains, and GVSHP continues to closely monitor the situation and push for alternatives to upzonings as a means to fund the park.

We are also closely monitoring any plans for Cobble Court, the beloved former farmhouse and home of "Goodnight Moon" author Margaret Wise Brown at 121 Charles Street at Greenwich Street. Late last year the house was advertised for sale at an exorbitant price and described as a potential "blank canvas for development," in spite of the fact that it is located within the Greenwich Village Historic District. This set off alarm bells that a new owner might seek permission from the Landmarks Preservation Commission to demolish or move the house, which has been altered over time and was moved to this location from Yorkville in 1967. While any such application is currently only theoretical, GVSHP took no chances, and quickly compiled exhaustive documentation of the history of the house and its very intentional move to this site in the West Village, including interviewing the former owner. This will give us irrefutable evidence of Cobble Court's historic significance, and its connection to this site, should it ever be

needed in response to an application for demolition, removal, or radical alteration of the house.

GVSHP also looked to the future by issuing a report calling for the Landmarks Preservation Commission to better protect properties and neighborhoods under consideration from landmark designation. GVSHP documented how too-early, extra-legal notification of certain owners, and slow action by the Commission, has in too many cases allowed unscrupulous developers to alter or demolish properties being considered for landmark designation. Sadly, this has included works by Frank Lloyd Wright and Morris Lapidus, and many buildings in our neighborhoods. We recommended and are pushing for a series of reforms to the system, to prevent more such losses.

And in March, GVSHP issued another report documenting the Real Estate Board of New York's pivotal role in blocking affordable housing measures. GVSHP took this unusual step in response to REBNY's attempts to undermine preservation protections by claiming such protections undercut the affordability of housing in New York City. Distributed to every media outlet and every elected official in New York City, the report and accompanying op-ed sought to redirect the conversation

about our city's affordability crisis away from REBNY's self-serving narrative, and towards a real examination of the challenges we face.

This effort was also aided by a standing-room only panel discussion GVSHP held in September with government leaders, affordable housing advocates, and leading academics about the true relationship between affordability and preservation.

Affordability also intersected with GVSHP's agenda around small business preservation, a growing issue in which the Society has taken an increasingly active role. We joined the campaign in support of the Small Business Jobs Survival Act, a bill before the City Council which would give small businesses a fairer shot at negotiating leases they can afford. And we launched our "Business of the Month" program, which harnesses our e-mail list, blog, and social media to highlight, celebrate, and encourage the patronage of beloved small businesses in our neighborhood. We have received hundreds of nominations from the public, and encourage all of you to submit more, and to share each "Business of the Month" with your friends and neighbors (in fact, June's Business of the Month, Cobblestone Vintage Clothing, was chosen and appeared today).

So as you can see, it's been a very busy year for GVSHP, and we have much to do in the year ahead. But even in these incredibly challenging times, facing opponents with exponentially greater resources than we have, you, our members, have enabled us to accomplish so much. It's your support and participation which ensures that preservation continues to have a strong voice in our neighborhood and our city. Thank you for all you do, to make all we do possible.

I hope you will stay with me to enjoy the rest of this wonderful evening, and stay with GVSHP as we work hard to preserve and protect our neighborhood in the coming year. Thanks.