

We all benefit from a clean Providence

Walking along the newly relocated Woonasquatucket River and observing the new walks, roadways and bridges, one cannot help but be impressed by this continuing evidence of the revitalization of the capital city's downtown. Equally impressive is the general overall cleanliness of this area and the rest of the city center. It was not always so.

Just 16 years ago a piece in the paper claimed that "Providence is the dirtiest city of them all." To substantiate that claim reference was made to the littered streets with sand unswept from the previous winter, overflowing and dented rubbish bins, urine-stained entrances to buildings, rubbish-filled planters and the general unkempt appearance of the downtown which "should make us ashamed of Rhode Island's capital city." "Providence is the pits" was not an uncommon expression.

Subsequently, the downtown business community banded together and provided funding to start the Downtown Providence Improvement Association (DPIA). Conditions improved as the organization flourished. But even with city funding, the continuing loss of businesses from the downtown with their leadership, interest and money led to the demise of the DPIA.

During this time a strike by city garbage workers left the entire city burdened with uncollected wastes, which prompted the mayor to call on a few recognized business leaders to address this whole question of cleanliness. From this inauspicious beginning 12 years ago, the Keep Providence Beautiful, Inc. (KPB) organization has grown to become the leader in addressing the cleanliness of the city and in helping engender a new sense of community responsibility and pride.

Through its education programs, both in the schools and in the community; its community involvement; and its public awareness programs; this 600 member organization has done wonders with limited resources.

Acting as facilitator, promoter, advocate, clearing house, organizer, catalyst and educator, KPB has worked to restore vacant lots into parks, help with tree plantings, maintain 250 litter receptacles and do a variety of other activities as well as work with police, environmentalists, neighborhood groups, school children and community organizations to reach their goals. In the last year alone KPB organized over 100 cleanups using the services of more than 5,000 volunteers.

To fund such activities is a challenge, and 20 percent of their budget comes from fund-raisers, such as the Pasta Challenge held during the annual city Waterfront Festival. Membership constitutes 10 percent of total revenue, while Providence provides 12 percent and foundations contribute 5 percent. But the biggest single item, 53 percent of the \$351,000 budget, comes from in-kind services provided by the community. This latter item is the result of the work of the small staff which fosters this type of community support.

After 12 years of working to improve the community (photometric surveys indicate the city is now 70 percent cleaner than it was a decade ago.) it is refreshing to see the enthusiasm still exhibited by the members and officers. This was apparent at the group's recent annual

meeting held to recognize community efforts. Awards were given to such diverse groups as Edwards and Angell, which provided in-kind services; Alice Engram-Hammed, director of the Olneyville Housing Corporation who recruited 150 volunteers for the annual Providence cleanup; and Ray Walters who, among other things, planted over 1,000 tulips in Trinity Square. And KPB is the catalyst to make these things happen.

It is a tribute to the leadership of KPB that they have been able to maintain the momentum necessary to achieve their goals. After all, who gets excited about continuing to clean-up graffiti-covered walls, collect the litter that uncaring people throw away and work in neighborhoods that many others have abandoned. But besides accomplishing these things, they are able to get others involved.

That was the message of Roger W. Powers, president of Keep American Beautiful, Inc., who came to speak to the more than 100 persons in attendance.

Twenty years ago there were only three cities that were members of Keep American Beautiful; today, KPB is one of the 500 affiliates in 41 states that work within the national organization's framework.

That was the message also of the incoming President, Robert E. Dupre Jr., who said that his personal goal was to double the membership, with a special appeal to those who live outside Providence to become members. Providence is a special place in this small state of ours, ranking

as its convention, civic, medical, educational, cultural, transportation, governmental, manufacturing and entertainment center. And all Rhode Islanders stand to benefit as our capital city prospers.

Others also feel this way because many of the more than 2,000 volunteers who participated in the April 30 Clean-Up, at which 200,000 pounds of rubbish and 80 tons of tires were gathered, were from outside the city. For a variety of reasons they still felt connected with Providence.

The same should be true for businesses, especially those operating in the city. Besides helping improve the community from which they earn their livelihood, becoming members of KPB opens the door to more business contacts and the networking opportunities provided.

City Year, the Providence Preservation Society, the Chamber of Commerce and a host of other community-wide and neighborhood organizations also are contributing to the revitalization of Rhode Island's capital city. But the work of Keep Providence Beautiful, Inc. needs to be placed right up there among those leaders helping to restore pride and respect in and for the city. All of us, whether residents or non-residents of Providence, are the better for it.

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