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RICK REDNISS

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2016 CITIZEN OF THE YEAR: RICK REDNISS

by Bill Squier

When the members of the Jewish War Veterans Fred Robbins Post 142 announce their annual Citizen of the Year it's hardly a surprise that the recipient of the award is often a Stamford native. But, few if any of the honorees have had a local history that is as alive as the 2016 Citizen of the Year, Richard W. Redniss.

Enter the lobby of Redniss and Mead, the engineering and surveying firm where "Rick" Redniss serves as president, and you can't help but notice a large showcase filled with artifacts that trace the company's origins back to 1893. Hanging on the wall of Redniss' office is a framed certificate that he was given when he graduated from the Sarah Walker Nursery

School— which he hastens to point out happened pre-Sarah Walker. Ask him if it's true that his mother, Claire, sang at Citizen of the Year award dinners in the 1960's and Redniss can not only confirm that fact, but has the printed program to prove it within easy reach of where he's sitting!

Celebration of Rick Redniss as the Citizen of the Year will

OPPOSITE PAGE: RICK REDNISS / CHRISTINE SIMMONS PORTRAITURE / CONTRIBUTED PHOTO



be marked with an award dinner planned for May 3rd and the addition of his name to a plaque at the Government Center at a separate ceremony. But, his native status is only a small part of the reason that he is being honored. Of greater importance are Redniss' ongoing efforts to ensure that his hometown's future is as bright as its past. As the go-to consultant on matters of the city's land use, it's hard to think of anyone else who has played as great a role in crafting the zoning regulations that govern Stamford's quality of life. And a remarkable list of nonprofit charitable and civic organizations have benefitted from Redniss' tireless volunteerism.

Redniss grew up in the Glenbrook section of Stamford on Maitland Road – a street just north of Route 1 that runs parallel to Courtland Avenue.

And, thinking back, Redniss wonders if the dramatic changes that took place in that neighborhood when he was young helped to form the person that he is today. Both sides of his family had lived in Stamford for many years by the time he was born in the winter of 1949. His maternal grandparents, Isadore and Sara Walter, immigrated to New York City from Poland and Russia, and then joined Sara's brother, Ike, in Stamford in 1916. His paternal grandmother, Esther, who had lost her husband to a train accident before Redniss' father, Robert, was born in Yonkers, NY, arrived in Stamford in the 1930's. Like the Walters, she was originally from Russia and came here to live with family.

Redniss says that his earliest memory is of his grandmother, Esther, accompanying him across Courtland Avenue to the grounds of the Stamford Museum, which was then located in Courtland Park. He remembers that there was a walkway between two of the houses on the eastside of Maitland Road. "We used to be able to cut through and be at the museum in minutes," Redniss says. The Stamford Museum was in a vine covered carriage house on former estate of E.Y. Weber. The site featured a barnyard and a wildlife area surrounded by open fields, a scattering of woods and, according to Redniss, the occasional snake pit! "We would play all over the place," he says. "The Low-Heywood school was on Courtland Avenue too, and had the best sleigh-riding hill. When it snowed, we had our own mountain!"

But then, in 1955, Courtland Park lost half of its acres to the construction of the western end of the Connecticut Turnpike.



And the Stamford Museum was forced to relocate. "It all disappeared," Reniss sighs. "It broke my heart. Going up to where the museum is now was like a field trip! You'd have to fill the gas tank and pack a lunch! And nobody asked my opinion of what should happen." Redniss feels that experience imprinted itself on his psyche and has had an influence on his approach to zoning and the preservation of open space.

After attending the J.C.C. Nursery School, Redniss spent his elementary years bouncing between Julia A. Stark and Glenbrook Schools. He completed his public school education at Rogers Junior High and then Stamford High School, graduating in 1967. Then, it was off to Lafayette College in Easton, PA, where his original intention was to study engineering. "I got there, started to use my slide rule and decided that wasn't for me," Redniss laughs. So, he shifted his sights to becoming an artist and transferred to Adelphi University on Long Island. "I thought that I had a little bit of artistic talent," he admits. "Then, I got to Adelphi and discovered that my talent was very little! So, I switched to Elementary Education, got into teaching and absolutely loved it!"

At Adelphi, Redniss also fell in love with a fellow undergraduate student, Robin Golub. The two were married after Junior year and graduated in 1971. Next, the couple was accepted into a graduate program offered by Antioch College at one of its expansion campuses in Putney, Vermont. Antioch is an Ohio-based liberal arts school, founded by education reformer Horace Mann in the 1890's, famous as a hotbed of freethinking and social activism. "The whole college was an old mansion,"



ABOVE: Rick Redniss' parents – Claire & Bob Redniss c. 1948
LEFT: JCC nursery school graduation c. 1954
(Rick Redniss is front left)

CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS/RICK REDNISS

2016 Thanksgiving – largest Redniss family gathering ever at Rick Redniss' home. (Rick is fourth from the left, standing)



Redniss remembers. “You lived in there and took your classes in there – everything. A lot of Peace Corps people went there.” Their son, Seth, was born in Vermont the summer after his parents had completed their Masters in Education.

By 1975, Redniss was employed as a teacher at the Murray Avenue School in Larchmont, NY, while he, his wife, son and daughter, Lauren, who was born a year before, were living in Stamford. “I taught fourth grade,” he reports. “Then, moved with half that class up to fifth grade; then, up to sixth, where I taught for four years. Around then, I bought my son a winter coat that cost more than I’d ever spent on a coat for myself. It was life’s wake up call. I had a wife, two kids and I realized that it all cost money. I also had started working with a school-within-a-school program at Mamaroneck High School.”

At the high school Redniss reports that he met two people who started him down the path to a career in planning. One was Paul Davidoff, whom he describes as the “Godfather of Inclusionary Zoning,” aka affordable housing. Davidoff helped create a Masters of Urban Planning program at Hunter College that piqued Redniss’ interest. So, he set up a co-teaching arrangement where he was working four days a week so that he could also take classes at Hunter one day a week and at night. “The only way that I could accomplish it was on a motorcycle,” Redniss says. “I would ride to 68th and Madison Avenue, park in front, then ride home and never got stuck in traffic. But, I got cold in the winter!”

“I’d been an average student,” Redniss continues. “But, I did really well for the first time.” That led to a potential job opportunity with Herman Baillo, Ed Koch’s Deputy Mayor. But, when Redniss realized that working for the City of New York meant a salary that was lower than he was earning as a teacher, he grew discouraged and almost quit the Masters program. Fortunately, they gave him a scholarship and he stuck with it and graduated in 1978.

The second influential figure was Martha Munzer, who, among other things, was famous for being the first woman to graduate from MIT with a degree in electrochemical engineering. “We had the school-within-a-school connection,” Redniss explains. “And took some incredible field trips.” Despite a better

than 50 year age difference, the two became fast friends. A great believer in conservation education, Munzer authored 11 books in her lifetime that focused mostly on ecology and planning. Munzer and Redniss considered collaborating on a book. So, he approached his father to ask for a loan that would allow him to do research and write that summer of 1978. Instead, Robert Redniss offered his son a job.

Robert Redniss, who was building homes after serving in WWII, had purchased the surveying and engineering firm from the widow of the original owner in 1957. In the decades since, the business had grown from a mom-and-pop operation that he ran with his wife, Claire, out of his Maitland Road home to a firm so busy that it was short-staffed. So, Redniss accepted his father’s offer, even though he wasn’t quite sure of how he was going to fit in. “Then, I started going to hearings and seeing people make presentations,” he explains. “Having studied it, I realized that a planner could be the quarterback. Then, the lawyers could do the legal; the architects could do the architecture; the engineers could do the engineering; and the planner could be the one who put it all together. So, I started doing that for the firm.”

But, Redniss is on record as deciding early on that he would only fight for what he believed to be “good planning initiatives.” And a look back at the last 39 years bears out that claim. “I’ve gotten to work on a lot of creative zoning to correct things,” he continues. “And when I say I ‘wrote’ regulations, I mean that I proposed changes that got vetted and adopted by the city.” Much of the work that Redniss has done was to try to strike a balance between the needs of Stamford’s central business district and a desire to preserve the tranquility of the surrounding neighborhoods.

He began writing zoning regulations in 1981 when he took it upon himself to propose a change in Stamford’s Residential Designed District regulations. “Subdivisions were cutting up everything,” he explains. And Redniss felt that the existing cluster regulations, intended to encourage bigger setbacks, more open space and less pavement, were difficult to follow and that discouraged people from putting them into effect. So, of his own accord, he rewrote and proposed changing the city’s

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cluster-housing regulations, which dealt with dwellings that are grouped closely together. “That launched my career of writing zoning,” Redniss reports.

In the three and a half decades that have followed, Redniss has tackled a wide variety of issues associated with Stamford’s land use. “I’ve helped write a lot of inclusionary zoning regulations, parking reduction regulations that encourage downtown housing, and regulations for adaptively reusing offices as residential buildings. I also worked with the Historical Society to allow them to move to the Martha Hoyt School. And I got to write regulations for the volunteer fire companies



S.H.S. Class of 1967 * Sophomore Class Officers and Representatives
Sue Houle, Sec, Bill Haggerty, 2ndVP, Rick Redniss, President, Matty Kiiskinen, VP, Jerry Pta, Treasurer

ON SPREAD: CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS/RICK REDNISS



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
Rick Redniss' wife, Robin | Class President c. 1965 (Rick is in the middle, front) | Rick Redniss (second from left) at the 1999 law school graduation of his son Seth (second from right) with (from left to right) Claire (Rick's mother), Lauren (his daughter) and Robin (his wife) | Rick with children Seth & Lauren on family vacation

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so that they could have dormitories in their buildings.”

“I’ve been really lucky to be involved with many historic preservation initiatives,” Redniss continues. “The urban renewal that Stamford embraced in the late 1960s tore down a lot of great old buildings and downtown housing. It changed the city’s character. By the time I came along, the die had been cast. So, the question became how to weave the fabric back together? How to save historic buildings and bring back housing. You write incentive zoning.”

That’s a strategy in which provisions are granted to developers, like extra building height, in exchange for improvements that the city feels will benefit the public at large.

Redniss points to the renaissance of Stamford’s downtown and the Downtown Special Services District as an examples of what he means. “I volunteered to help the DSSD write new zoning to change the Bonus Density section,” he says. “It used to be that if you put up an office building you could get extra office space by satisfying certain criteria. Some of those things didn’t necessarily contribute to street life – some of them were even counter to it. So, we created a different menu of amenities that could earn you more floor area. And together we were able to turn the Titanic around! We started gradually bringing the front doors and housing back that make downtown more pedestrian friendly. And we did it in a way that made sense to the developers.”

Among the many nonprofit and civic organizations to which Rick Redniss has lent his expertise are the Stamford Boys and Girls Club Foundation, Stamford Land Conservation Trust, Stamford Museum and Nature Center, Stamford Jewish Community Center, Fairfield County Hospice House, the Veterans Park Ad-Hoc Committee, the Mayor’s Taskforce on Open Space, Person to Person and the Jewish War Veterans Community Scholarships. Redniss notes that community involvement was part of the family culture when he was growing up. “Early on, my parents were involved with the Boy Scouts, United Way, Hadassah and other non profits,” he says. “My grandparents were founding members of the Jewish Community Center and Temple Beth-El. When my father died in 1984, he was the President of ARI, the Stamford Land Trust and was also involved with the Exchange Club.”

Redniss reveals that it was his father’s passing that led to one of his longest stints as a volunteer. “I was going through his mail and found a letter from the Boys and Girls Club asking him to join their board,” he recalls. “I still missed teaching. So, I responded that my father couldn’t join, but that I would if they wanted me.” That has led to 33 years of service including serving as the President of the Foundation that oversaw the



FROM TOP: Rick with big brother, Ray-circa 1961 | Stark School c. 1961 (Rick is front left) | Prom Night – 1967 (Rick is 3rd from left)

REDNISS HAS SPENT MUCH OF THE PAST EIGHT YEARS ON THE PLANNING AND CONSTRUCTION OF THE FAIRFIELD COUNTY HOSPICE HOUSE... GROUND WAS BROKEN FOR THE FACILITY IN DECEMBER OF 2015 AND REDNISS IS HOPEFUL THAT THE HOSPICE HOUSE WILL BE COMPLETED LATER THIS YEAR.

building of the Stillwater clubhouse – something that proved to be especially daunting when, after raising millions for the construction, the economy soured and key donors were unable to honor their pledges. So, plans were scaled back and construction was completed in two phases paying cash plus establishing an endowment. He was recently involved with the reopening of the Yerwood Center and now is helping with the creation of the teen center.

Redniss has spent years on the planning and construction of the Fairfield County Hospice House. It is a project that holds a special place in his heart, due to his mother's death in hospice from pancreatic cancer. "The saga of hospice in Stamford goes back 20 years," Redniss says. "But, the prior effort had to run like a nursing home rather than a residence, so it wasn't a sustainable model. It's difficult for families to manage care at the end of life. We wanted to provide a home environment and let families come visit anytime, day or night."

Five years ago Redniss was helping the Roxbury Community Association decide what to do with their deed restricted land just south of the Merritt Parkway at the intersection of Den and Roxbury Roads that previously housed a church, parish house, and community center. RCA was willing to donate the land to a hospice in keeping with its public purpose deed restriction. State Legislators, including Rep. Daniel Fox, helped craft legislation that would allow them to operate like a home. Redniss adds that even Gov. Malloy stepped in with bond funds to help complete the construction.

Ground was broken in December of 2015 and Redniss expects that hospice house will be completed this summer. But, opening day is bound to be especially poignant. Like so much of what he has done for his hometown, the project has brought Rick Redniss full circle with his family's past. As it happens, his father built many of the nearby houses. So, just up Den Road is Walter Lane, which bears the surname of his grandparents. And the small body of water across the street is named Lake Claire. ■

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