

Year in Review: The top 10 stories of 2009

From Senator Theatre on the auction block to Dixon's conviction

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10 - HAPPY ANNIVERSARIES

Not that she was about to retire, but if she was, "this would be the time," remarked Sister Marie Rose Gustatus as she hit the 30-year mark last month as principal of St. Thomas Aquinas School in Hampden.

Gustatus wasn't the only one reaching a major milestone in 2009. Especially early and late in the year, people and groups in north Baltimore were celebrating significant anniversaries.

They were achievements in community service; in sports; in matrimony and religious ministry; in philanthropy; retail; education; and the restaurant business.

One was an anniversary not to celebrate, but to mourn.

Collectively, they were anniversaries of interest not only to those marking them, but to their communities, and in some cases, all of north Baltimore.

Mimosas on the house

Anita Ward, owner of the Roland Park Bakery and Deli in the Roland Park Shopping Center, served free champagne mimosas Jan. 5 to celebrate the eatery's 25th anniversary.

During breakfast, longtime customers signed well-wishes on an embroidered apron with the words, "Congratulations on 25 Years," printed as a gift for her.

"The good bran muffins attracted me initially. I like coming here for the ambiance and the people," Gene Byrd, of Madison Park, said over a breakfast of fried eggs, sausage, toast and coffee. "It's just a real cozy place."

Turning a page

Shirley LaMotte, of Guilford, celebrated an anniversary on Jan. 24. She is chief executive officer of Baltimore Reads, which marked its 20th year.

The attorney and consultant was also celebrating her own first anniversary since taking over the organization that was facing the resignation of its director and loss of much of its federal and city aid. She shaved \$100,000 in its operating expenses -- and added \$225,000 in grants to its budget, which had fallen from \$4.5 to \$1 million in five years.

Increasing the grants that much in an economic downturn was "pretty remarkable for a nonprofit," she said.

Love story

A small crowd gathered at the Govans Library June 24 for the 68th anniversary of the first time Jim and Mary Bready met.

They've been coming back to the library every year since June 1941, when Jim Bready, 22, a private in the Army's Chemical Warfare Service, pedaled 20 miles from his base in Harford County on his bike, wearing his uniform, to call on a girl he had met, who worked at the library.

She wasn't there when he arrived, having switched shifts with Mary Hortop, 16.

"I thought, 'That's one hot man,' " she remembers. "I meant that literally. He was wet. He was dripping."

They married in 1943, and raised three sons. Jim Bready enjoyed a 40-year career as a reporter, copy editor and editorial writer for the now-defunct Evening Sun, and an overlapping 61-year stint as a book

columnist for the Sunday Sun. His wife taught French, history of art and college entrance classes at St. Paul's School for Girls.

When they returned to the library this June, he at 90 and she at 84, well-wishers and an anniversary cake awaited them.

40 years of Greater Homewood

The nonprofit, Charles Village-based Greater Homewood Community Corp., which represents 48 communities and works with 17 public schools in north and central Baltimore, held a gala Oct. 24 to commemorate its 40th year.

Greater Homewood has helped build bike paths and playgrounds; organized associations and festivals; advised residents on dealing with developers; tutored children in public schools; planted trees; calmed racial tensions during school desegregation; taught adults to read; and started anti-crime patrols.

"So much of what happens in my district, the Greater Homewood Community Corp. has been instrumental in," said Mary Pat Clarke, 14th District city councilwoman and a former executive director and past president of the board of directors.

Cathedral's 50th

Celebrating 50 years Nov. 15 was the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen, the biggest church in north Baltimore. Pope John Paul II celebrated Mass there in 1995. Seven years later, funeral services were held there for Baltimore Colts quarterback Johnny Unitas.

And the cathedral on north Charles Street was packed in February for a funeral service for popular Friends School ninth-grader Graham Harrison, who died of leukemia.

The cathedral's 50th year was also the 25th and final year for Monsignor Robert Armstrong, who is retiring for health reasons Dec. 31.

Go, Gundy's!

Gundy's gift shop, first located in Park Heights, celebrated its 70th anniversary, and the 25th at its current location on Deepdene Road in Roland Park, with events Nov. 2-7.

The store was conceived as a mini-department store, and Diane Lochte, owner since 1994, maintains that mix, plus personalized service, such as free gift wrapping. Longtime customers include Ted Herget, who has bought Christmas cards from Gundy's catalogs for 30 years.

Usually, he said, he comes in in August to pick out cards, and as he leaves, he loudly wishes everyone a merry -- albeit early -- Christmas.

100 years of hoops

Friends School hosted Washington counterpart Sidwell Friends in a girls basketball game Dec. 1. It marked the 100th year of girls basketball at the two schools.

The game was also the official tip-off for the local Quaker institution's celebration of its 225th anniversary and status as Baltimore's oldest school.

Back when Friends and Sidwell (then Washington Friends School) first played, dribbling was banned -- and the court was divided into three zones.

Moreover, baskets were closed on the bottom until a pull-chain was yanked to release the ball.

Painful memory

As the year drew to a close, one anniversary was solemn. Dec. 5 marked two years since a fire on Ridgewood Road in Roland Park claimed the lives of Matthew Young, 16, and his sister, Abigail, 11, and severely injured their father, Steve.

The Youngs no longer live there, but the heavily damaged house is being restored, and the last visible trace of the fire is soot above a first-floor window.

9 - METHODISTS REGROUP

Hampden's Methodist community endured seismic shifts in May, when the United Methodist Church's Baltimore-Washington Conference decided not to rebuild Mount Vernon UMC, 801 W. 33rd St., which was damaged in a lightning-strike fire in 2008.

The dwindling congregation of Mount Vernon agreed to merge with Good Shepherd UMC, 3800 Roland Ave. Later in the year, Aldersgate UMC, 42nd Street and Falls Road, also closed. Its 30-member congregation merged with the 60-member Mt. Washington UMC, which is part of the conference's Hampden parish. Aldersgate was later sold to a church based in Park Heights.

The upheaval could be due to larger problems, said some longtime members of the Methodist parish earlier this year.

"There's a lot of Methodist churches in Hampden -- too many," observed Tom Kerr.

Betty Callahan, 79, recalled an old saying when she was young, that Hampden had as many bars as churches.

"The bars have won," Callahan said. "They're still here and we're not."

8 - LOYOLA BECOMES UNIVERSITY

Loyola College officially celebrated its transition to Loyola University on Sept. 25, and the Rev. Brian Linnane, president of the 157-year-old institution, said its mission as a leader among Catholic colleges is to be a "top-rated, comprehensive university," as well as an intimate, liberal arts-minded institution.

Loyola now emphasizes graduate programs in nine academic disciplines, including speech-language pathology and pastoral counseling.

Being called a university is important for marketing Loyola abroad because "internationally, there's a stigma that a college is a secondary school," Linnane said in a pre-transition interview.

Loyola also boasts several professional schools, including the Sellinger School of Business, ranked by the magazine Business Week as one of the top 50 undergraduate programs in the nation. New this fall, was the School of Education, upgraded from a department.

Loyola, with 2,500 graduate students among its overall enrollment of 6,000, is positioning itself as a moderately sized university, and is trying to upgrade athletics, especially the basketball program. The university is inquiring about playing some of its bigger games at 1st Mariner Arena downtown and is looking to increase scholarship money to attract higher-quality basketball players, Linnane said.

7 - WALK IN THE PARK

Baltimore County has agreed to lease Robert E. Lee Park from Baltimore City for \$1 and plans to spend \$6 million to rejuvenate the popular, but down-at-the-heels park.

Repairs and improvements will include reconstructing and reopening the pedestrian bridge, restoring existing trails, adding parking and setting up a secure dog park, long a bone of contention among park-goers with pets.

The entire 453-acre property was essentially an illegal off-leash dog park, claims Bob Barrett, director of the county Department of Recreation and Parks. The new dog park will be legal, but confined to one area of the park, he said.

It will take a year to 16 months before the improvements are completed, Barrett said in July, noting that the county is in the first phase of a larger plan that, in future years, might include dredging the reservoir as well as adding paddle boats, fishing tournaments and concerts.

An estimated 41,000 people visit the Mt. Washington-area park each year. The heart of it is Lake Roland, which was created by the damming of Jones Falls in 1861 to produce one of the first municipal water supplies for the city.

The city stopped using the lake for drinking water in 1915, but the area thrived as a park. However, the city has had limited resources to devote to park management and maintenance, and the park has fallen into disrepair.

6 - LEGIONNAIRES DISEASE STRIKES

An outbreak of Legionnaires' disease at the Stadium Place senior citizens apartment complex in October knocked the swine flu off newspaper front pages.

Five people at Stadium Place, an affordable housing complex for 380 seniors on the site of the former Memorial Stadium, contracted the disease, and one woman died. By late October, the number of people sickened reached seven, though no one else died.

City and state health officials scrambled, so far without success, to find the root cause of the outbreak, and the Govans Ecumenical Development Corp., which owns Stadium Place, called in Philadelphia-based Legionella Risk Management to do remediation, including disinfecting the complex's water supply by raising chlorine levels, and superheating the hot water tanks in each apartment to 130 degrees in an effort to kill the bacteria that causes the disease.

Legionnaires' disease was the swine flu of its day in 1976, when it struck conventioners in Philadelphia.

Most at risk are people 65 and older, smokers or people who have chronic lung diseases, such as emphysema. Nationally, 8,000 to 18,000 people are hospitalized with the disease each year.

5 - CATHOLIC SCHOOLS IN CRISIS

St. Mary of the Assumption School is no more, but there might be a public charter school there.

The Catholic Archdiocese of Baltimore announced in May that it was closing the 134-year-old, K-8 parish school on York Road in Govans, which was \$1 million in debt.

Principal Elizabeth Phelan, who attended the school as a child, remembered when it was so big that it didn't

have enough room for all of its students.

But the economy took a toll this year on several Catholic schools, including Towson Catholic High, a feeder school for north Baltimore, which also closed.

Many students who attended St. Mary's received financial aid, and many of their parents lost jobs, making it difficult, and in some cases impossible, for them to pay tuition that had already been slashed in an effort to save the school.

Now, the founders of Afya, a public charter middle school in northeast Baltimore's Belair-Edison community, want to open a K-8 school for 400 students in the old St. Mary's building.

Parishioners of St. Mary's Church support a charter school but say they would want to use it as a Sunday school, too, so as not to lose their spiritual connection to the building.

4 - MAYOR DIXON'S CONVICTION

No community passed judgment on Baltimore Mayor Sheila Dixon more than Hampden did.

At least one of the jurors who convicted Dixon Dec. 1 of misdemeanor embezzlement of gift cards meant for the poor was Elaine Pollack, who lives in Hampden.

Referred to as "prolific Juror #11" in a Baltimore Sun column, Pollack sent several notes with questions to Circuit Court Judge Dennis Sweeney during the trial and told the Baltimore Sun afterward that although she voted for Dixon for mayor and considered herself to be a supporter, she felt there was enough evidence of misappropriation to convict.

"I did a good job," the 29-year-old mother of two told the Sun.

Six days later, when Dixon rode in the annual Mayor's Christmas Parade, it was riding into a lion's den.

There were many boos, and many more cheers for Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, the City Council president riding in the car behind Dixon. Rawlings-Blake would become acting mayor if Dixon steps down.

Onlooker Alex Figro, 52, of Hamilton, gave a shout-out to "the next mayor," and said, "The old one should be in jail."

Dixon's fate as mayor now may depend on whether Sweeney sentences the mayor to probation before judgment. Appeals are also likely.

3 - RECESSION FALLOUT

The economy rained on Charles Village's annual parade June 6-7. The parade that kicks off the annual Charles Village Festival was canceled. Organizers said they lost two sponsors and sponsorship overall was down 40 percent from 2008. They were also anticipating the parade would cost more because the city has stopped giving discounts on parade permits to help close its \$66 million budget deficit.

The cancellation was symptomatic of the recession's effect on north Baltimore -- and so were the 12-week pottery classes valued at \$345 that Baltimore Clayworks in Mt. Washington let laid-off people take for free starting in February.

It was a rough year for development in north Baltimore, as some projects languished. Plans by New Jersey-based Hekemian & Co. to redevelop the Rotunda shopping mall as a mixed-use complex with a hotel, condos and additional retail were on indefinite hold.

Baltimore-based Struever Bros., Eccles & Rouse pulled the plug on its own mixed-use project, the Olmsted in Charles Village, and Johns Hopkins University in April began negotiating to purchase the vacant lot at 33rd and St. Paul streets.

But other developers pushed ahead in a bad economy. Donald and Thibault Manekin redeveloped the former U.S. Census building on the edge of Remington and Charles Village as Miller's Court, affordable housing for new public school teachers in the city.

They plan to turn the old Druid Mill in Hampden into Union Mill, a second apartment complex for new teachers.

Also on track were plans for a trolley line -- maybe wireless -- connecting downtown Baltimore to north Baltimore.

And earlier this month developer Rick Walker gave tours of the Anderson Automotive Group site, also on the Charles Village-Remington border, which he hopes to redevelop as a \$65 million shopping center with a Lowe's, Marshalls and Staples.

2 - MASTER PLANNING

Roland Park's long battle in 2008 to stop the Keswick Multi-Care Center from buying 17.5 acres of green space from the Baltimore Country Club and developing it as a 343-bed retirement community paid off in 2009, as Keswick officially dropped those plans in March. CEO Libby Bowerman said neighborhood opposition and lack of support from City Council members were the key factors in Keswick's decision.

But Roland Park didn't go back to sleep. Rather, the upscale neighborhood seemed to be energized and spent the rest of this year focusing on a variety of projects, ranging from raising money to fixing up the area's aging firehouse to closing off Roland Avenue to traffic for one glorious morning to promote walking, biking, skateboarding and renewed attention to environmental sustainability.

And in November, the community undertook its most far-reaching project yet -- to draft a master plan for Roland Park in conjunction with Baltimore City's comprehensive rezoning efforts. Despite competition from holiday bazaars and festivals on a Saturday morning, 140 people turned out for a charette to brainstorm ideas for transportation, infrastructure, future development areas, housing, green, open and recreational space, commercial and retail, historic preservation and livability.

The Roland Park Civic League hopes to use the city-backed master planning as a way to better protect its remaining green space, ad to address longstanding problems like traffic congestion on Roland Avenue during school days.

1 - SENATOR THEATER SOLD

As if there had been a death in the family, Gayle Grove cried in the arms of her friend, Brian Hale, as the landmark Senator Theatre was sold to Baltimore City at a foreclosure auction July 19.

Time finally ran out on Tom Kiefaber, longtime owner of the storied, 70-year-old art deco movie house on York Road. Kiefaber struggled mightily for many years to pay his \$900,000 mortgage to 1st Mariner Bank, even launching a highly publicized fundraising campaign in 2007.

The city, which was seeking at least \$1 million after buying the mortgage note from 1st Mariner Bank earlier this year to prevent a bank auction, ended up with the winning bid of \$810,000 and put out a Request for Proposals to buy or lease the theater as an entertainment venue.

Now the bids are in. Charles "Buzz" Cusack and his wife Kathleen, co-owners of the Charles Theatre, want to maintain it as a single-screen theater with a crepe restaurant next door, similar to the Charles, which has an adjacent tapas restaurant.

Other bids are by Noch-Noch Productions, which wants to use the Senator Theatre as a showcase for puppetry and puppet shows; development company J.R. Owens Corp., which wants to renovate the theater and build 24 two-bedroom apartments there; and Towson University, which wants to relocate campus radio station WTMD-FM there and use the theater for concerts and other events.

For what it's worth, there's no doubt who Kiefaber is supporting. In a missive on the Senator's Web site, www.senator.com, he writes, "The Senator Theatre and Towson University are both celebrated, historic institutions that have evolved in close proximity on York Road for over 70 years. It may well be their destiny to be linked together and ensure that the renowned and irreplaceable Senator Theatre will realize its great potential, and in the process be preserved and protected in perpetuity for the enjoyment of generations to come. This cinematic cliffhanger may have a surprise happy ending after all. "See you at the Senator, and go Tigers!"

An earlier version of this story contained incorrect information regarding Tom Kiefaber's mortgage.

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user comments (1)