House Tour Impresario Carole Schaffer Turned Diversity into Unity, Neighbors into Friends

in The Echo Staff | More than a year ago, under the headline “Prospect Lefferts Gardens is ‘On the Map’,” the Real Estate section of the New York Times reported that some residents call PLG “Brooklyn’s best kept secret.”

There were a lot of voices in that piece: neighbors, real estate developers, bloggers, local merchants and brokers, all weighing in on the dreams and anxieties that come when gentrification hits a suddenly hot, working-class, predominantly minority neighborhood.

But one voice was absent in that otherwise upbeat article: Carole Schaffer’s. The one woman who knew the most about who is moving into the neighborhood and who is moving out—by dint of her 30-plus years of running the Prospect Lefferts Gardens House & Garden Tour—was irrationally absent from the narrative.

Carole moved here in 1976 to Midwood I with her husband, Art, and soon joined the board of the Lefferts Manor Association. While the Prospect Lefferts Gardens Neighborhood Association had been running the house tour for about 30 years before their arrival, there came a stretch of years when PLGNA’s management of the event went dormant. Carole jumped into the void and made the house tour her specialty.

This year, the 45th Annual PLG House & Garden Tour is dedicated to Carole Schaffer. Not since the 1980s has a house tour taken place in PLG where Carole was not the impresario in charge.

Stricken in 1979, at the age of 33, with Hodgkin’s disease, doctors acknowledged that her heart had been damaged while fighting the malady with radiation. That treatment must have aged her, she died 40 years later, just this past October.

Outside of neighborhood historian Bob Marvin or elder grassroots activist Bob Thomas, few more than Carole to put this neighborhood on the map. She did it by running for office or starting a blog or becoming a real estate broker. She did it by orchestrating the annual house tour with a firm discipline and an interior designer’s discerning eye.

A registered dietician and nutritionist, Carole possessed the charm and grace of a cultural attaché to broad church and government, the careful eloquence of a Democratic state senator, and the conviction of an intellectual activist. Once deftlyulturized into a redistribution of the public’s wealth, her persuasiveness became irresistible.

Carole became a neighborhood icon—perhaps better known on first sight by homophones than most of the elected officials of this district—as a result of her house tour management, coordination and follow-up. Every year she pulled out a sheet of potential participants that she began compiling the year before, striving to get at least eight houses by March. Then she’d work on finding house sitters, which, Art says, was in some way easier than finding families to open their homes.

And she’d court members of the press who lived in the neighborhood to help expose the event in their media outlets. While she did not believe that gentrification and diversity were antagonists, she was opposed to the 23-story building going up at 65 Flatbush and protested against it, and the rising rents that will come to PLG as a result.

Carole was also a big supporter of The Echo and got us out of the flaying pan several times, fact-checking issues to detect our errors and grammatical misdeeds before we went to press. We will forever be in her debt.

This year’s tour is being put together by a committee of LMA board members, longtime residents, and close friends of Carole and Art’s. They all picked up the baton with the same spirit and vision that she exhibited.

But it will be a decidedly different feel this year not bumping into Carole, enjoying her hardwork, and not having the chance to watch her greet visitors and thank families for their participation.

PLG was lucky to have had her love, commitment and generosity for so many years.

Though she is gone, here’s hoping her spirit guides the event for years to come.
In 1940, Sonnet Takahisa and Hollis Headrick were living with their fourteen-year-old son, Tyler, in a Park Slope appartment. Tyler frequently visited the home of a classmate who lived on Rutland Road between Bedford and Rogers. The two families became friends and Sonnet and Hollis decided to look for a house in the neighborhood.

They were especially drawn to the light-filled open spaces of a limestone house on Rutland II. Built in 1901 with a strong Arts and Crafts aesthetic, its former owners had opened up the first line of comfortable and expansive details such as stained glass windows and pointless furnishings.

In 2004 the family moved in, filling their new home with their Stickley and craftsman inspired furniture, as well as the expressions of art, pottery and textiles. There was even enough room for Hollis's drum set. They became active in the neighborhood and each year help organize Rutland IV block party. In 2007, with several women from the block, Sonnet started a book group that is still going strong ten years later.

The couple are passionately involved in the fields of arts and education. Hollis is currently president of Arts and Cultural Strategies, Inc. as well as co-president of PLG Arts. He is also a drummer and percussionist performing with the neighborhood ensemble, Amaun Addicts, as well as several jams, and workshop ensembles.

Drawing on her experiences as a teaching and learning expert, Sonnet is now the Deputy Director for Engagement and Innovation at New York City Department of Education.

Having their house on the tour this year means they’ll be too busy on tour day to work as volunteers. Hollis enjoys being a tour guide and Sonnet loves working, with other members of her family, in the refreshments area.

They wanted to put their house on the tour because they enjoyed meeting neighbors and visitors when the house was on tour, and they also wanted to honor Carole Schaffer for her many years as the tour coordinator.

After 13 years, the house needed new paint and a few other improvements—the tour was the incentive to get the work done.

Rosa loves the neighborhood, the history, the new friends she’s made. She treasures the diversity on the block, including people her own age and those several years older as well as the more recent arrivals. She is delighted to display works by local artists—photos by Carlos Augusto Pacheco, oil by Noel Hailwood, drawings and paper leaves by Martin Ettinger. She enjoys having enough room to host a PLG Arts chamber music performance and a contemporary folk opera. She says her husband’s death, the deaths of several siblings to AIDS were the catalyst that launched her writing career. She didn’t start writing until her fifties, giving up a successful career as a nurse in prison—passed away from heart disease. She remembers when a teenaged Laurence Fishburne lived in her family’s hotel. She’s done much of her writing in addition to the arts, but she says her husband’s death, the deaths of several siblings to AIDS were the catalyst that launched her writing career.

Rosa loves the neighborhood, the history, the new friends she’s made. She treasures the diversity on the block, including people her own age and those several years older as well as the more recent arrivals. She is delighted to display works by local artists—photos by Carlos Augusto Pacheco, oil by Noel Hailwood, drawings and paper leaves by Martin Ettinger. She enjoys having enough room to host a PLG Arts chamber music performance and a contemporary folk opera.