

PEOPLE & PLACES

Preservation Powerhouse

Kim Sheppard's Whitemarsh Foundation has preserved one of the Wissahickon Valley's most picturesque plots of land

BY KATE DOLAN

In the center of a picturesque, pastoral Whitemarsh Township landscape sits a restored 1850s farmhouse, a sentinel guarding dozens of acres of meadow and farmland. This is the headquarters of the Whitemarsh Foundation, an organization created two decades ago to preserve the past and guard the future of portions of the historic Erdenheim Farm.

The farmhouse abuts the Dixon Meadow Preserve, 14 rolling acres that are home to more than 30 species of native trees, 12 species of native shrubs and six species of native grasses and wildflowers.

Over 150 species of birds and animals pass through the meadow on this portion of repurposed farmland.

"We have coyote and fox. Most recently, we had three rare bird sightings," said Whitemarsh Foundation President Kim Sheppard of the nature preserve on Erden-



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Whitemarsh foundation President Kim Sheppard. (Photos by Bradley Maule)

heim Farm. “The Preserve is a true jewel in the community.”

The nature preserve became a reality in 1999, when concerned neighbors, who feared the storied 450-acre Erdenheim Farm would fall to developers if the right agreements were not made, began meeting to discuss general land preservation. In 2001, the Foundation formed with a mission to protect Erdenheim Farm from development. The Foundation is now working to assist other organizations in conserving open space in the Whitemarsh Valley and surrounding areas.

If one is driving on Flourtown Road or Thomas Road, the rolling green landscape is unobscured. That is in part because by 2009, the Foundation had raised enough funds to purchase and preserve two tracts of land totaling 180 acres. The remaining acreage was purchased by the McCausland family who continues to operate the land as a gentleman’s farm, raising livestock like Black Angus cattle, chickens, and Cheviot sheep. The family also produces vegetable and fruit crops, breeds horses and stewards a greenhouse and orchard.

This agreement marks the concerted effort of Natural Lands, Whitemarsh Township,

Montgomery County, The Dixon family, The Hill at Whitemarsh, Montgomery County and the State of PA.

“The Preserve is a living example of meadow management,” said Sheppard. “And it continues to evolve with new native plantings.”

The Dixon Meadow Preserve has become a place for visitors to enjoy open space, observe wildlife and to learn about the land and land conservation. It is a reflection of the Foundation’s expanding mission to increase awareness of open space preservation, while providing access to those places and educating about their flora, fauna, wildlife diversity and stewardship.

“During the preservation process, one goal was to ensure that education play a vital role in the outcome,” said Sheppard. “Since the Preserve was built in 2014, seeing the hundreds of birders who visit each year or meeting community members who take part in our classes is really exciting.”

Finished in 2016, the Farmhouse serves as an education center for water quality and local climate change, as well as the Foundation headquarters. It was named the Dixon Meadow House to commemorate Edith R.

Dixon and her late husband Fitz Eugene Dixon Jr. and his family, who owned and operated the farm from 1912 until his death in 2006.

Sheppard says those rare bird sightings, which include the American Bittern, attracted people to the Preserve from all over Pennsylvania and other states.

“We realized that we created a landing spot for birds,” said Sheppard. “We had created new migratory patterns for birds. It’s become an important destination for birders in our area.”

Whitemarsh Foundation has partnered with Wissahickon Trails, Morris Arboretum, and The Hill at Whitemarsh among others for educational programs. Visitors can access the Preserve and in the future, a trail system that connects to the Montgomery County Green Ribbon trail system.

Aside from the birdwatching appeal, visitors also come to walk along the trails and boardwalk that winds through the Dixon Meadow Preserve.

“The safety, the beauty, and the pristine environment, it’s an opportunity for people to get a look within the farm that they don’t normally get,” said Sheppard. “This is different, easy to access and really very special.”