

Richard Stein, Conservation Champion

by Carolyn Myers Lindberg



For this “conservation champion,” community is a personal thing. Richard Stein has lived in the Hillsdale neighborhood of Portland for 27 years and his community involvement has literally shaped the neighborhood.

His initial connection to nature was nurtured through his mother’s gardening and camping adventures with his father. In his early-20s, Richard spent a lot of time hiking through natural areas and hitch-hiking around the country. He says he saw how beautiful the world was and began to recognize that he had a part to play in its protection. It was then he decided that he would “live lightly” during his time on earth. Subsequently, through his study of architecture and environmental design in college, he dedicated himself to being a steward of the earth.

Following college, Richard worked at an outdoor school in Colorado and over the years has introduced young people to the outdoors. In particular, he remembers hosting a foreign exchange student from Sweden who, like many inner city teenagers, never spent much time in the wild. So Richard took him hiking and camping. He laughs when he thinks about how much the student hated it at first. But he says by the second time out, the young man clearly got it - he understood that he “had a relationship with nature.”

Richard was a member of Friends of Terwilliger (FOT) for many years and remembers a lot of significant work they accomplished in the 90s. One of the more memorable efforts was to halt the construction of a 42-unit condominium development planned near the Chart House restaurant, which the Friends group felt wasn’t appropriate within the park. The group protested and the matter was eventually appealed to the state land use board. While Richard didn’t know the other conservation champions (Robin Vesey, Anton Vetterlein and Doug Weir) very well when the project began, they came to rely on, admire and trust them during the years of fighting the condo development. Eventually FOT helped broker a deal with the City of Portland and Metro under which Metro purchased the land from the developer, halting the project for good. Other FOT projects included dealing with automobile traffic and speeding along Terwilliger Boulevard and installing a gateway sign to Terwilliger Parkway.

Richard says all of his work with FOT started with a simple invitation by a neighbor, much like the idea behind Connect SW PDX, a program in the Homestead and West Portland Park neighborhoods to connect residents to their neighbors and to the conservation programs operating in their communities. And perhaps that primed him to jump into the next big project, improving the Hillsdale neighborhood.

Richard says he had just moved to Hillsdale in 1990 when he and a friend walked down to the neighborhood shopping district to get a cup of coffee on a snowy winter day. Unfortunately,

they couldn't find one. He says he looked around and thought "I can't even buy a cup of coffee in this business district! We need a coffee shop!" He also thought the area was sort of ugly and not very inviting. A light bulb went off in his head and he went home and drew up some sketches of what Hillsdale could look like. He took them to the business association meeting and everyone looked at them and nodded agreeably. One person came up to him after the meeting and said, "Let's make this happen." The connection with Dr. Richard Garfinkle, an orthodontist in the neighborhood, led the two to instigate a neighborhood 'visioning' meeting at Wilson High School. About 120 people showed up. The organizers took down everyone's ideas and brainstormed with the group about their dreams for the neighborhood. That laid the foundation for the formation of the Hillsdale Neighborhood Association in 1995. With the City of Portland's help, a neighborhood vision plan was developed, paving the way for zoning changes, a farmer's market, a neighborhood newspaper, a library, sidewalks, a pedestrian-activated crosswalk signal, and better connection with area schools. During the past 20 years, Richard says, much of the vision has been realized.

Many projects in the community have Richard's fingerprints on them. After seeing plazas in Europe, he realized there was no community hang-out space in Hillsdale. Working with other neighborhood bicycle enthusiasts, he helped design, finance and install a plaza in the middle of Hillsdale, giving folks a place to sit down and talk with one other. Then Richard noticed there was no place for local teenagers to hang out. He created a food cart pod near Wilson High School and now manages the space. He says after five years in existence, the pod is busy every day, not only giving kids a safe place to be together but also connecting them with the rest of the community.

Why does he work so hard to better his community? Richard says, "I can't not be involved because it's not 'the' city, it's 'my' city. What do I want my neighborhood look like? What do I want my city to look like? If I take ownership and you take ownership, we suddenly are doing things together in our city and making it a reflection of who we are and what we value."

Richard believes his greatest success is helping create "a sense of community" in Hillsdale through collective vision, responsibility and perseverance. One success was when neighborhood activists and local property owners cooperated to transform an eyesore, a parking lot surrounded by chain-link fence, into a well-functioning and attractive parking space. That project in particular, he adds, is a prime example of how neighborhood residents and commercial property owners can work together to make something better for everyone.

On Richard's wish list for the future is a solution to the traffic and speeding problems on Terwilliger Boulevard. He'd like to see Terwilliger to be seen as a sacred recreational place....closed to vehicles (except emergency) for extended times on weekends, especially during summer months. He believes it would be packed with walkers, runners, skateboarders, roller-bladers, and bicyclists, much like Golden Gate Park in San Francisco.

Richard sees a direct correlation between his work as an architect and environmental designer and his involvement in Hillsdale and Terwilliger. He calls his architecture and design highly organic and natural and says, "I subscribe to the 'Think globally, act locally' philosophy." Many people are moving to the Portland area, and Richard believes we need to "make them part of the solution" by giving them the opportunity to help solve neighborhood problems through each person's particular set of skills and passion. After all, he says, "Our city is beautiful and wonderful because we are here making sure it stays that way."

It's a personal thing for Richard, and the City of Portland is the better for it.

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