

For Immediate Release From The Brookline Senior Center

How Tenacity, Perseverance, and A Determined Trio Helped to Build the Brookline Senior Center

By: Leanne Cordischi

In the 1980's many communities were creating senior centers and resource hubs for their seniors. Ruthann Dobek, as a recent social worker grad, recognized that Brookline needed a senior center.

Her social work colleagues Sue Welpton and Helen Sampson also saw the value that a center would bring the Brookline Community. The optimistic trio approached their boss, Arlene Stern, numerous times about building a Senior Center for Brookline. The young women received several rounds of NOs. Ms. Stern was concerned that it would require too much work, money and aggravation. However, determined and armed with a frosted cake and some solid reasons why the community needed a senior center, Ruthann and her colleagues sat down one afternoon with their boss to discuss, over bites of cake, why the center would be such an asset in Brookline. Finally, Stern relented and agreed to move forward.

After the successful meeting, the team approached the town of Brookline. Although Brookline recognized the need, the officials told Ruthann and her team "if you want it, you're going to have to show community support and come up with the money." The response made the team recognize the need to create a coalition, and they decided a press conference was needed to begin to build a base of supporters. The team reached out to Senator Ted Kennedy's office and his son Ted Kennedy Jr. accepted an invitation to attend the press conference on behalf of his father.

The team continued to think of ways to pick up the pace and generate additional awareness and the much-needed funds. At an out of the box brainstorming meeting, Helen, one of the team members, volunteered that over her summer vacations she had worked at a Wisconsin music venue and had met Graham Nash, from Crosby, Stills & Nash. She suggested reaching out to him to see if he would be willing to participate in a fundraising concert on one of his future trips to Boston. Graham said that since the project was still in its "idea" stage, he was apprehensive about giving a concert for the project, but alternately agreed to attend the upcoming press conference to lend his support.

During the 1988 press conference, Nash told the crowd "don't let anyone tell you it can't be done. We should honor our mothers and fathers and our grandmothers and grandfathers ... but we need not just good wishes but action." Ted Kennedy Jr. also spoke to the crowd of over 100 and urged the town to move forward to create a senior center for its residents. "We believe in maximizing the quality of life," Kennedy told the crowd.

With both Ted Kennedy Jr.'s and Graham Nash's attendance at the Beacon Street Holiday Inn press conference and a passionate team, the event fueled the effort, and led to the growth of an enthusiastic base of supporters. Ultimately the plan outlined in the press conference also caught the interest and attention of Baystate Federal Bank Charitable Foundation; "the fairy godfathers of the Senior Center."

The Foundation graciously donated a half million dollars, kickstarting an unstoppable fundraising momentum.

After several years of a “foot on the gas” effort, the team of a few became a committee and 4 and half million dollars was raised.

With the funds in hand, Ruthann and the Project Committee set out to find a location to build the Senior Center and found an ideal parking lot site off of Beacon Street; which now houses the Courtyard Marriott. They envisioned a building where the Senior Center would occupy the first couple of floors, and the next floors would be rented out as medical offices, to serve as a consistent source of income for the center. Excited and energized, the team attended a town meeting ready to close the deal on the site. However, town officials put up a major road block. In order for the team to purchase and build the Senior Center on the lot, the town mandated that the team must commit to an additional 4 million dollars to build underground parking for the site, to replace the parking the town would lose by surrendering the space.

Deflated but not defeated, the team left the meeting to look at alternatives. Gordon Hurwitz, the team’s architect, decided to approach his colleague Roger Stern, who owned a lot at 93 Winchester Street. He discussed with Stern the plan, the brutal town meeting and the need for the senior center, convincing Stern to donate the property to the Town of Brookline. Stern made the donation with the provision that the only thing the town could do with the land was to build a Senior Center.

So, with a confirmed site, finances and the supportive community, Ruthann began to plan the programming and needs of the building. Many meetings and architectural alterations later, the Brookline Senior Center opened its doors February of 2001.

Ruthann and the committee’s foresight, tenacity, and ability to pivot when necessary, helped to build a valuable hub and resource for the Brookline community. Its thriving existence continues 25 years later honoring a great idea, an excellent plan and a very determined woman, who will be remembered for helping to change a community!

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