

2014 Annual Report

Executive Director Andrew Berman

Welcome everyone, as always it's wonderful to see so many old friends and new for this, GVSHP's 34th Annual Meeting. Thank you to our very generous hosts, The New School, and thank you in advance to our Awards Committee for their terrific work in selecting this year's honorees from hundreds of worthy nominations. For making tonight's event possible, I'd also like to thank our staff – Sheryl Woodruff, Karen Lowe, Amanda Davis, Drew Durniak, and Ted Mineau – and our volunteers, including our photographer extraordinaire, Bob Estremera. I'd like to also extend a special acknowledgement to all the GVSHP Trustees here tonight, who give so much of their time and talent to make what we do possible.

Before we get to our Awards program, it's my distinct pleasure to provide you with a review of GVSHP's activities and accomplishments over the past year, and a brief look at the year ahead.

In March, a great milestone for GVSHP was the publication by Rizzoli of *Greenwich Village Stories*, GVSHP's new book of memories, recollections and impressions of the Village and East Village as told by more than sixty artists, poets, musicians, playwrights, directors, and other Villagers. Contributors include Lou Reed, Andrew Solomon, Mimi Sheraton, and Hettie Jones, among many others. Artwork and photographs by Berenice Abbott, Milton Avery, Allen Ginsberg, Saul Leiter, and Weege are among those which grace the book.

Over 1,100 people attended our book events during April, including an opening reception at Keith McNally's Morandi restaurant, and readings at the Strand, the Writers Room, and Symphony Space. John Leguizamo, Lenny Kaye, Penny Arcade, Dave Hill, Ralph Lee, and Isaac Mizrahi each read their stories to rapt audiences. The book – edited by GVSHP Trustee Judith Stonehill, with royalties supporting GVSHP's work – has received rave reviews from the New York Times and Vanity Fair, and is already in its second printing.

The book is also of course available for sale here tonight, and some of our fantastic contributors including our awards MC Calvin Trillin, Penny Arcade, Mimi Sheraton, Martica Sawin and Lauren Belfer are here tonight and available to sign copies.

In May, GVSHP staged its major annual benefit, our eagerly-anticipated Spring House tour. This year's, I'm glad to say, was a stunning success – one of our highest-grossing and best-attended ever, enabling hundreds of tour-goers to access some of the most impressive and enticing private homes in the Village, while raising nearly a quarter of GVSHP's annual budget. A committee of more than 20 dedicated individuals, along with 8 generous homeowners and dozens of businesses, and more than 130 volunteers, made this incredible event possible.

This was just one of many forms of support GVSHP received over the past year. Membership support, which comprises about 75% of our annual income, rose by over 16% in the past year. Over the past ten years, the number of our members has grown by 200%, while membership support has increased by almost 600%.

New members come to GVSHP through a variety of means, one of which is our ever-changing and expanding programming. This past year GVSHP conducted 51 public programs, attended by over 3,200 people – a 60% increase over last year’s already impressive numbers. Almost all of our programs are free and, with the exception of our members-only events, open to the public. These ranged from an exclusive advanced preview showing of the Coen Bros. film “Inside Llewyn Davis” (with a discussion with the film’s location manager), to programs about the legendary East Village Jazz venue the 5 Spot, a presentation on the wooden houses of Greenwich Village, and a discussion of the history of the venerable Hotel Albert.

We also continued our highly popular historic plaque program in partnership with the Two Boots Foundation. This past year we added markers to the former site of the legendary San Remo Café on Bleecker and MacDougal Streets -- the unofficial home of many of the Beat Generation’s greatest writers, painters, and musicians - - as well as to poet Frank O’Hara’s East 9th Street former home, where some of his most memorable pieces were written, and where his colorful surroundings made their way into many of his most beloved poems.

Meanwhile, the dynamic GVSHP Broker Partnership expanded its continuing education program for real estate professionals, nearly quadrupling the number of participants. This vital program allows GVSHP to help educate these brokers and realtors who play such an important role in the development of our neighborhood, about the history and value of preservation.

Over the past year, GVSHP's Children's Education program continued to serve students from across the five boroughs in grades one thru seven, using in-class sessions and a tour of the Village to teach about immigrant history, urban development, and 19th century life in New York. Nearly half of the students who enrolled in the program qualified for need-based scholarships from GVSHP, allowing them to participate for free.

GVSHP has also been hard at work expanding our social media presence, as a means of engaging and mobilizing a broader audience. In the past year our Facebook reach, and our number of Twitter followers, have each grown by about 40%.

Our blog, Off the Grid, and our website, gvshp.org, continue to attract viewers from across the globe. Our website gets more than a quarter million pageviews each year, with some of our most popular blog posts receiving more than 10,000 hits. We've been working hard to add new kinds of content to our website to expand our audience and give the public more ways and reasons to preserve our neighborhood. We've added more than twenty videos to our YouTube page in the past year alone, making recordings of most of our public programs, Town Halls, and rallies permanently accessible for the first time, as well as now providing links to videos of relevant hearings by the Landmarks Preservation Commission and other city agencies on issues in our neighborhood.

This past fall, in the lead up to the municipal elections, for the first time we partnered with Manhattan Neighborhood Network to provide on-line and video information about City Council and Citywide races and candidates, to help educate and inform our members and encourage them to participate in the electoral process. I am proud to say that this past year our neighborhoods had among the highest voter participation rates in the city.

Our on-line presence has also been a great tool for helping local residents learn about what's going on every day in our neighborhoods, and how to get involved. Our Landmarks Application Webpage is the first and still only one of its kind in the city, providing invaluable information about every single application for a change to a landmarked building in our neighborhoods that requires a public hearing. It provides the history of the building, the proposed changes, when and where the application will be heard by the Community Board and the Landmarks Preservation Commission, and how you can give in-person, e-mailed, or written testimony before a decision is made. It tracks the application -- for months, or in some cases for years -- from its first filing to its resolution, letting you know of any modifications to the application, new meetings that have been scheduled or decisions rendered, and allows you to sign up for alerts to update you on all such developments. In the last year, over 7,000 people have used this webpage – up 27% over last year -- and individual application pages have been viewed nearly 22,000 times – an 18% increase over last year -- making this an incredibly valuable and widely-used tool.

Of course we don't just let the public know about these applications; GVSHP carefully reviews every single one of them ourselves, and when appropriate, issues alerts to our members and advocates to the Community Board and Landmarks Preservation Commission for what we believe is the right outcome. In the past year, our Preservation Committee reviewed 108 such landmarks applications, an increase of nearly 30% over last year, ranging from storefront alterations to demolition and new construction. I believe our positions, and the input from our members, had a noticeable impact upon many of these applications.

Another place where we had a very big impact this year was in the courts. In January, NY State Supreme Court Justice Donna Mills ruled in our favor in our lawsuit against NYU's massive expansion plan, finding that the City had illegally handed over public parkland to NYU for this project, thus significantly hamstringing the university's ability to move ahead with the entire project. This ruling was a great vindication of our, and all our co-plaintiff's, contention that this plan was not only wrong for our neighborhood and our city, but fundamentally legally wrong as well.

Never one to see the error of their ways, the NYU administration appealed the judge's ruling, and unfortunately, the City has joined in that appeal. Fortunately, however, we are able to not only respond, but have counterappealed – meaning we may be able to expand the scope of our legal victory, while simultaneously defending the gains we have made. New hearings are expected later this year.

Another spectacular victory came in December when, after a roughly ten year fight, the City finally approved our new South Village Historic District, covering 250 buildings on more than a dozen historic but endangered blocks south of Washington Square. GVSHP had proposed this district for landmark designation, which includes some of our neighborhood's most beloved sites, and which is the largest expansion of landmark protections in Greenwich Village since 1969. We fought successfully to expand the district to include several NYU buildings, including the full-block Vanderbilt Law School on Washington Square South – a building which, without landmark protections, could be demolished at any time and replaced with a 300 ft. tall dorm.

This is actually the second phase of GVSHP's larger proposed South Village Historic District, the first phase of which was designated in 2010. But earlier this year the State of New York and the federal government each approved nearly all of our full proposed South Village Historic District for the State and National Registers of Historic Places, offering tax and financial incentives for preservation to the entire neighborhood, and protecting against state and federal actions, or use of state and federal funds, that might adversely affect the historic character of the area.

We had some other important victories at the Landmarks Preservation Commission as well. At 9-19 Ninth Avenue in the Meatpacking District and 192 7th Avenue South at West 11th Street, we were able to help prevent the Landmarks Preservation Commission's approval of proposals we felt were inappropriate and out-of-character additions to the neighborhood.

We finally saw some important progress at 43 MacDougal Street, a landmarked 1846 house at King Street which had been abandoned and left to deteriorate for nearly two decades, which GVSHP and neighbors fought for years to get the City to fix up, or force a dysfunctional owner to do so. After considerable pressure and some fits and starts, a new owner now appears poised to finally repair and restore this long-neglected historic property. Landmarks approvals supported by GVSHP have been granted, and work is set to begin this summer.

And at 40-56 10th Avenue at 13th Street in the Meatpacking District, we were able to help defeat a zoning variance that would have increased by 34% the size of a planned development. That developer argued that the presence of the High Line on a corner of the site created a “hardship” which required an exemption from neighborhood zoning restrictions. GVSHP argued that the High Line’s presence made the site uniquely valuable, and that no such exemption should be granted. Fortunately, the Board of Standards and Appeals agreed.

A partial victory came this Spring when after a nearly 50 year wait, GVSHP helped get the Landmarks Preservation Commission to re-hear and reconsider for landmark designation the endangered 150 year old Tifereth Israel Synagogue at 334 East 14th Street. First considered in 1966, the Commission never voted on the proposed landmark designation of this one-time German Baptist and Ukrainian Orthodox Church, leaving it in ‘landmarks limbo’ for nearly a half century. But when GVSHP learned the building was advertised for sale, we swung into action, calling upon the Commission to render a decision on its landmarks status, the first step towards which was holding March’s public hearing.

We are pushing the Commission to take a final vote, but even the hearing helps keep the building safe in the interim.

But there were disappointments too. At 100 Barrow Street, GVSHP pushed back hard against a plan for a proposed 250 ft tall tower on what is currently a parking lot on the St. Luke's campus. And at 27 East 4th Street, we protested loudly against a proposed 9-story hotel that would not only overshadow, but possibly physically endanger, the neighboring Merchant's House Museum. In the face of a vast public outcry, the Landmarks Preservation Commission reduced the size and changed the design of both projects. But they still approved what we felt were inappropriate intrusions in very special locations in our neighborhoods, and in the case of 27 East 4th Street, what also appeared to be a genuine potential threat to the structural integrity of a great and historic neighboring institution.

We will clearly face many more such challenges in the coming year. The outgoing chair of the Landmarks Preservation Commission refused to consider the third and final phase of GVSHP's proposed South Village Historic District, the area south of Houston Street, and thus we must push the new administration and new landmarks chair, who is expected to take office in July, to move ahead with landmarking this area. In February, GVSHP released a rezoning proposal for the South Village which will help protect the area from inappropriate development. A standing-room only crowd at the community board public hearing expressed unanimous support for our proposal, which then received a strong endorsement from the Community Board. But we need to convince the City – which has so far been mum on the idea -- to adopt this plan, or consider the long, difficult and expensive option of applying for the zoning change ourselves.

The South Village is not the only part of our neighborhoods lacking in adequate protections. Though we were able to help get much of the East Village rezoned in 2008 and 2010, and get two new historic districts designated in 2012, much of the neighborhood is still lacking in landmark protections. GVSHP is working closely with a coalition of neighborhood and preservation groups to formulate new, additional landmarks proposals for the neighborhood to protect its outstanding historic resources, and we expect to release those proposals later this year.

The situation is even more urgent along the University Place, Broadway, and 14th Street corridors. These areas are almost entirely lacking in landmark protections, with zoning which often encourages high-rise development, and in some instances favors hotel or dorm construction over residences. This has led to plans for a 155 ft tall tower to replace Blatt Billiards at 809 Broadway, south of 12th Street. Perhaps more disturbingly, the Bowlmor Lanes building at University Place and 12th Street has been purchased for development, where current zoning could easily allow a tower of 20 stories or more. GVSHP is working closely with local groups and has reached out to the developer to urge him to keep any new development on the unprotected site modest in scale and in context with its surroundings. But we are also seeking to build a coalition around proposals for extending landmarks and zoning protections to the area, to prevent further inappropriate demolitions and out of scale new construction on streets so rich in architecture and history.

This is not the only threatened area of our neighborhood. The passage of state legislation allowing “air rights transfers” from the Hudson River Park to inland areas poses a serious challenge to our efforts to preserve and prevent overdevelopment of the western edge of our neighborhood. GVSHP has been on the front line of this battle, calling for answers to key questions about the legislation, and calling for enforceable restrictions to prevent overuse and abuse. We held a widely attended Town Hall meeting in the fall and staged a letter-writing campaign calling upon Governor Cuomo to drop plans for an air rights sale from Pier 40 that would forgo even minimal local consultation, which he seems to have done, for now. Additionally, we have proposed and pushed for alternative means for funding the park, and methods for using air rights that would not lead to increased development in our neighborhood – proposals that have won the support of dozens of community groups from Tribeca to Hell’s Kitchen. But staying on top of this Pandora’s Box of development potential will be a full time job for GVSHP in the months and years ahead.

Another full time job will be responding to attacks upon landmarking by the Real Estate Board of NY. The board, which represents some of the biggest developers in New York City, has waged a two front war against landmarking –claiming it is “out of control,” preserves unworthy sites, and prevents economic development, while simultaneously claiming – now that the de Blasio administration has made promoting affordable housing a priority -- that landmarking makes our city less affordable and less diverse.

GVSHP countered this Alice-in-Wonderland logic with a press conference outside REBNY's headquarters with leading affordable housing advocates and landmarking advocates from Harlem and Bedford Stuyvesant. The New York Observer called it "Preservationists Call REBNY's Bluff on Landmarking and Affordability." GVSHP also placed a series of op-eds highlighting how landmarking can actually help affordability and commissioned a series of studies to back this up. We even took our argument to the belly of the beast, accepting an invitation this fall to speak at REBNY's headquarters directly to their members – many of whom do not agree with the leadership's attacks on landmarking – about preservation's inherent value.

But given REBNY's vast resources and single-minded focus on diminishing landmarks protections, as well as the de Blasio administration's very intensive emphasis on affordable housing, this is an issue GVSHP will need to continue to tackle head on in the coming year. We must convince the powers-that-be that preservation is compatible with other goals like affordability, and must be a part of our city's planning and future.

The new administration's approach to landmarking still very much remains to be seen, as the Mayor's appointee as Chair of the Landmarks Preservation Commission is not even expected to take office until July. But GVSHP has already reached out to the new Mayor to urge key reforms in the landmarks system – from speeding up the landmark designation process so that historic sites are not lost during the waiting period, to ending the practice of not allowing the public to comment upon revised landmarks applications before they are voted upon -- as was done with the Merchant's House and St. Luke's proposals -- to making information about landmarks hearings, applications, and violations more accessible to the public.

And of course we must continue, on a daily basis, to monitor every single one of the over 6,500 buildings in our neighborhood for any new demolition or construction permits, so we can be sure to take swift action if needed. At the same time, we must keep tracking every one of the over 3,000 landmarked properties in our neighborhood every day for any new applications for approval for major changes – so we can inform the public, evaluate the proposal, and weigh in through the public review process.

That's just a portion of what we have done – of what you, our members, have made it possible for us to do – and what we must do in the year ahead. But with your support and assistance, I am confident that GVSHP will be able to rise to these challenges, and continue to make progress -- to document, celebrate, and preserve what we hold dear about our neighborhoods. I hope you'll remain by our side as we forge ahead. Thank you.