

**INSIDE**



## The Philadelphia Tribune Marks 125th Anniversary Story, Photos 1B



Volume 20, No. 22

Wednesday, June 3, 2009

Price 50¢



# TRIBUNE

SOUTH, SOUTHWEST PHILADELPHIA METRO EDITION

[www.phillytrib.com](http://www.phillytrib.com)

## Gardening pioneers take on 'green' initiative

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Packing dirt around a small plant inside the Concert Garden at 21st and Ellsworth, Point Breeze resident Oktavia Cherry said she never had an interest in gardening.

Her mother has a garden in the yard of her East Oak Lane home and has been known to revive dead plants for people, but tooling around in the soil didn't appeal to Cherry — until now.

Cherry is a member of the Point Breeze Pioneers, a neighborhood group dedicated to beautifying the community by cleaning up and maintaining green spaces. On a recent weekend, Cherry planted her first plant.

"Anything I can do to improve the neighborhood, I was going to do it,"

she said. "It's an amazing opportunity to revitalize this area, and I think by coming out here as a group and as neighbors, it builds that community connection."

Point Breeze Pioneers was co-founded in March by Antoinette Johnson, who bought a home in the neighborhood last year. An avid gardener, she saw potential in the neighborhood gardens and decided to do her part in changing peoples' minds about Point Breeze.

"This neighborhood has gotten a bad rap, and it doesn't deserve it," she said.

Standing in the Concert Garden, a 60-foot-by-60-foot space surrounded by a chain link fence and featuring a small stage, two park benches, a white wooden trellis and flower beds along the perimeter, Johnson said the space had been

maintained for years by neighbors who are now elderly. Before her group began working on the garden, it appeared no one had set foot in it in years.

The group decided their initial projects would be the Concert Garden, Manton Street Gardens at 19th and Manton, Wharton Square Playground at 23rd and Wharton, Haring Mural Garden at 21st and Washington and Chew Playground at 19th and Washington. Johnson went through the Neighborhood Gardens Association to find out who owned the properties and how to gain access to them. The Pennsylvania Horticultural Society and the Fairmount Park Commission provided supplies such as plants, seeds and mulch.

She recruited some neighbors, and the eight-member group had

their first venture at the Manton Street Gardens on March 11. The goal is to turn it into a picking garden, filled with roses, zinnias, peonies and vegetables.

By the time the citywide initiative, Spring Into Your Park, was held in April, about 70 people came out to spruce up Chew Playground. Johnson built an e-mail list, a Web site, [pbpioneers.com](http://pbpioneers.com) and a logo — a Pit Bull, which Johnson chose because the dogs also have an undeservedly negative reputation.

Now at least a dozen people come out for four or five hours on weekends. Her goal is to have the Concert Garden complete in time for a reggae show at the end of June.

"Things are happening so quickly — it's crazy. It was meant to happen because everything is coming

together."

She said she's most proud of how they've shown the community that "there is a group willing to take action and really do something, and make it viewable to the public. We really do care about this neighborhood and we're giving it a voice."

Lowell Goodman, a lifelong resident of the 2000 block of Ellsworth Street, paused as he walked by the Concert Garden.

"It's looking real nice!" he said.

Goodman said that the neighborhood respects what the group is trying to accomplish.

"Guess what, nobody bothers this little park," he said. "If any of the neighbors see kids trying to bother with this, they chase them away. We have a nice clean block and now it looks even better than it did, and we want to keep it that way."