

Elli Panichas: Reviving a forest

A Nature-Quiz: You hike up a narrow path in a forest laden with blueberry and blackberry bushes. You pass cathedral rocks, a few with hieroglyphic-type lines. Native Americans gathered here, to savor a panoramic vista that spreads for miles.

Where are you? Clue: Not New Mexico, British Columbia or New Hampshire

Answer: Silver Lake, on the Providence/Johnston line. You are on "the Hill." Not Federal Hill, Smith Hill or College Hill, but the highest of them all - Neutaconkanut Hill. The vista spreads from Woonsocket to Fall River to Newport.



Mike Lusi, Trail Manager, Robert Fitzpatrick, NHC Vice President, grimace in amusement as Elli introduces them as 'the next generation.'



View from the Hilltop Meadow



Guided walk to the King Monument



Unique outcroppings within this Oak/Hickory Forest.

Elli Panichas grew up near this Hill. During the Depression, in the summer, her family, with hundreds of other families, ate picnics on the Hill; they strolled through the flower gardens; they listened to band concerts at the peak. For immigrant families crowded into three-decker tenements, the Hill marked a bucolic respite. When the Works Progress Administration (WPA) opened hiking trails in the 1930s, people would saunter up.

"The Hill was the life of the neighborhood," Panichas recalls.

The Depression didn't mark the "glory days" of the Hill. Its glory began with the Narragansetts and other tribes who gathered on the top, where they looked down upon Silver Lake and the settlement beneath. Throughout the forest, carvings on rocks mark the rising and the setting of the sun. Today, we see the large rocks as lovely; the Natives saw them as sacred places, where braves hunted and prayed. Roger Williams noted this special place.

From the Native Americans to today, the Hill has had a checkered past. The Industrial Revolution brought mill-owners to Providence, who recognized the power of the region's waterways and the beauty of the Hill. The natives had no concept of "ownership"; but the English settlers did. Eventually, "ownership" - marked not by centuries of use but by deed - passed to two families, the Bordens and the Kings. Today atop the Hill, a stone monument traces the lineage of the Kings, a family that petered out in the early 20th century when the heirs had no children. The forest remained open to the public. Late in the 19th century, families from the East Side would take the trolley to stroll the paths.

From the King family, ownership passed to the city of Providence, which maintained the Hill as a park. But the land wasn't protected from either development or neglect. After World War II, the city sold off some house-lots and the forest fell into disrepair. Weeds grew over the hiking trails. The city no longer maintained the gardens. The band concerts stopped. In the vacuum, new "users" took over: drug dealers, vandals and delinquents, who found the forest a perfect cover for their gatherings. Not surprisingly, neighbors stopped coming.

Years passed. The Depression-era families who had loved the Hill moved on; their children lived in the suburbs. The new families who settled in the three-deckers warned their children to avoid the Hill.

Panichas grew up at the foot of the Hill, but after marriage, moved away. When she returned to Rhode Island in 1971, she built a house on the top of the Hill. She relished the panorama, but not the reputation.

"The pristine forest had become a dangerous dumping ground," she said.

She joined with a few other families who lived on the Hill. They resolved to restore Neutaconkanut. The group began their research into the history of the forest and the Native Americans who lived there. Their newly formed Neutaconkanut Hill Conservancy (NHC), a 501(c)3 non-profit, partnered with the city's Parks and Recreation Department. Their mission: reviving this neglected Hill.

In phase one, this partnership cleared the land of weeds, debris and even abandoned cars. Elli's career had given her the wherewithal to forge relationships with organizations that could help. She had served as publications director at Rhode Island College, followed by ownership of a marketing/design studio. In retirement, she had the time to focus on the Hill. Others brought their own expertise.

"We have a landscape architect, carpenter, police officer, librarian, electrician, realtor, retired Army officer and a journalist/photographer - along with other members' talents," she said.

In 2008, the city received a \$100,000 grant from the Department of Environmental Management to restore the trails. Students from Providence College's Urban Action Program joined with scores of volunteers to dig, shovel, weed and discard.

Today, the cleanup is complete. Phase II is underway, introducing this urban forest to Rhode Island's urban-dwellers. Last summer, the Rhode Island Philharmonic performed Prokofiev's "Peter and the Wolf" atop the Hill, drawing an audience of 450. Throughout the year, the Conservancy holds Family Days and seasonal guided walks up the trails. This year, the Paul Cuffee School incorporated the Hill into their fourth grade science curriculum. Next year, Elli hopes for more schools' participation.

In September, the Conservancy will invite all Rhode Islanders to explore the Hill. A History Committee is soliciting photographs and anecdotes from families who once lived in the area (including seven former governors). The day will include activities, music, food and hikes.

Urban residents have few opportunities to appreciate nature, or to develop a culture of conservation.

"We are lucky to have Neutaconkanut Hill as a place for that to happen," said Robert McMahon, director of Parks for the city of Providence.

Visit this special place, a spot that enchanted Native Americans. For more information, visit the Conservancy's website at nhill.org.