

Some Notes on the Early History of the Robert B. Gordon Natural Area for
Environmental Studies

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The world in 1970 was rapidly changing. The military action in Vietnam escalated almost by the day, the draft was reinstated, and the upstart Jets beat the established and heavily favored Colts in the Superbowl. Violence had not yet erupted about the war, but the country was on the edge.

I was a quiet student at West Chester State College in those days. I attended a community college in 1967-68 and arrived at WCSU the fall of the latter year, only to be told that there were no dorm rooms available. My next three years at WCSC were spent in private housing. I was a premed student who loved to take nature walks. I was not a joiner or a follower. I just wanted my degree and to spend time with my girlfriend.

Some of my biology classes took me to the “South Campus. I marveled at the beauty of the property—of the tall towering tulip trees and the diversity of wildlife. I was told by Dr. William Overlease, my favorite professor, of the dream of the faculty for a biological field station. At the time, I didn’t understand the adage of realtors—“location, location, location” and this was a prime tract of land.

Sometime in my junior year I learned of the college’s plans for this valuable tract. I was shocked when I looked at the plans—the buildings and sidewalks were widely spread out-- designed to take up the entire forest. While I could see that many of the beautiful trees would remain, it would definitely not be the same.

Back then, even as a young man of 20 years old, I understood certain things. First, I knew that confrontation, such as hostile rallies, taking over the president’s office, or chaining myself to a tree would not work. Second, a “winner take all” approach would not work. It had to be a compromise, where the college had space that it needed for expansion, but at least a portion of the site could be left untouched. Third, I knew that I would be more effective in working with a group, representing the WCSC students.

Putting together a group of interested students, we planned our strategy. We drafted rough plans showing how the same number and size of the buildings could fit nicely into half of the space. We found an architect who donated his time to discuss the matter with us and comment on our ideas.

Next, we mobilized the students, primarily through petitions and letters. The local media picked up the story—the word was out.

So much is hazy from those days, almost 40 years ago, but the yellowed front page article in the *Daily Local News* brought back memories. I remember that all of the administrators treated us fairly and with respect. I recall that Col. Robert Hannum was a tall, straight man with a military bearing, who seemed somewhat impatient with us, but listened to our ideas. Dr. Paul Rossey was a smaller man, who seemed like he had to give us an audience, but whose mind was likewise made up.

The most important event was my invitation to meet with the college's board of trustees. My favorite uncle died a few days before and the funeral was on the same day. I was torn until my aunt told me that my uncle would want me to finish the job I had started. I don't recall much about the board meeting. I presented my concerns about the proposed plan and offered alternatives. I recall that the board was kind and receptive and when I left the meeting I had a strong sense that they understood my ideas and would consider them.

I graduated a few months later and left for the Midwest to pursue my graduate degrees. I've thought about the situation over the years and am delighted to hear that some of the parcel was indeed saved and that a preserve has been established. I don't know what role I played, but I do know that it was an important part of my education.

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