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10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania Honors Smart Development Efforts

By Alison Murawski, Communications Associate, 10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania

As he stood on the corner of Chestnut and Third Streets in downtown Harrisburg, Bradley Jones, Vice President of Community Development for Harristown Development Corporation, didn't see deterioration that plagued the city block for years. He didn't see the vacant buildings that once housed retail and living space. He saw opportunity.

"When I look at these blocks," Jones said, "I see the true fabric of the community." To Jones, the buildings weren't just vacant structures or a reminder of a past era in Harrisburg. "This is about who we are and where we live."

In the spring of 2002, Harristown Development Corporation began to repair the torn fabric. The original two three-story buildings would become International House, a residence for 14 international college-aged students studying or interning in the United States. By 2004, with the acquisition of three more buildings, International House could accommodate 80 residents. It would give residents the opportunity to explore cultural diversity, to meet new people, and to experience what Harrisburg has to offer.

To complete the renovations, the buildings' original facades were preserved and refreshed, upgrades were made to the original structure, new electrical and mechanical work was completed, plumbing was installed, and the buildings were made handicapped-accessible.

Bradley Jones' vision had become a reality, and, in 2004, International House received a bronze award in the Commonwealth Design Awards from 10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania.

10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania is a statewide organization that seeks development opportunities that will support the social and economic viability of Pennsylvania's cities and towns. Protecting environmental quality, conserving fiscal resources, and preserving the state's rural and heritage resources are just a few items on an agenda fulfilled through research, policy, and education.

Each year, to honor and acknowledge smart development and redevelopment projects from around the state, 10,000 Friends holds its biggest event, the Design Awards. The awards, presented in 2004 by Governor Edward G. Rendell, recognize projects that demonstrate responsible land use practices – from urban, suburban, and rural development, to revitalization and redevelopment projects. 2004 award winners include the Plaza at PPL Center in Allentown, the Innovation Center @ Wilkes-Barre, and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia.

“International House, and all of the Design Award winners, are more about people than real estate,” said Jones. “It’s about bringing cultures together to discover the culture that exists right here.”

“Winning a Commonwealth Design Award gave us the opportunity to show the city, and even the state, what we do and why we do it,” Jones said. “These projects create real opportunities and a sense of optimism for older communities that have long been criticized for becoming stagnant.”

The fabric of Pennsylvania that is captured in these projects make International House, as well as all of the recipients, worthy of such a prestigious award. Entries in the Design Awards must reflect a list of eight criteria. Revitalizing existing communities and business districts; strengthening land use planning and implementation; and conserving fiscal resources are some criteria used in the selection of Design Award recipients. Eligible entries are then reviewed and scored by a distinguished jury of professionals.

“Our hope for the Design Awards is that they encourage smart development where infrastructure already exists,” remarked Janet Milkman, President and CEO of 10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania. “We want to highlight and congratulate those developers from all around the state who are making our communities stronger and begin to build a network of builders, developers, design professionals, and local officials who are experts at smart growth.”

The Design Awards are just one way that 10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania achieves its mission of revitalizing existing communities and business districts, and conserving the state’s natural, historic, fiscal, and rural resources. “Projects like International House can so easily go under the radar,” Jones said, “but 10,000 Friends understands the challenges and problems that we face, and they don’t just offer solutions – they make those solutions possible.”

With the Commonwealth Design Awards slated to be held this year on June 13 at the State Museum in Harrisburg, 10,000 Friends will honor yet another group of innovative projects – and people – that help Pennsylvania to live up to its name as the Keystone State.

For more information about 10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania and the Commonwealth Design Awards, visit the website at www.10000friends.org.