

Celebrating 50 years of environmental leadership

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The sound of snow crackling under walking boots gives off a desolate vibe - trees are still without their leaves, nature is seemingly without life.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JOHN C. GOODWIN

Students who took part in a 1960s summer camp at the Tenafly Nature Center.

However, no matter what one does while walking the trails of [Tenafly](#) Nature Center's Lost Brook Preserve to avoid racket, silence is obsolete even while sitting still on the steps of the Dr. Joseph DeFilippi Shelter Building in front of Pfister's Pond. On a relatively warm February Saturday afternoon, the ice hesitantly crackles, holding on to the last of winter.

Every once in a while the ice will crack so loudly, sounding like a firework on the Fourth of July. It is a natural commemoration of the [Tenafly](#) Nature Center's 50th anniversary this year, honoring the success of the efforts to keep nature in tact and vision toward the center's future.

"We're fortunate to have any nature center, specifically one of this size," said [Tenafly](#) Mayor Peter Rustin in a phone interview. "I'd like to make sure it remains in tact for future residents like was done for us 50 years ago."

The environmental movement of the United States can be traced back as early as Henry David Thoreau, who in 1845 studied and wrote study about nature on Walden Pond. Later, following the likes of Theodore Roosevelt and later Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the drive to conserve the wilderness took off, with the [Tenafly](#) Nature Center at the forefront of [Bergen County's](#) preservation efforts despite widespread development, and according to Tenafly Nature Center President Mike Neus, even a proposed antiballistic missile site.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JOHN C. GOODWIN
Christopher Letts, Tenafly Nature Center director from 1970 to 1973.

The original purpose of the center "predated the environmental movement in the 60s and the 70s," he said. [Englewood](#) and [Demarest](#)'s centers came later, for example.

During that time, a core group of about 12 [Tenafly](#) residents got together and started cleaning up the land that had been used as a dump. Joyce Zeiller and her husband, Don, who both grew up in Tenafly were at the frontline.

Zeiller, in a telephone interview, said the early volunteers really felt like some of the land should be saved,

She reminisced about how empty [Tenafly](#) was before World War II. "Every corner was a vacant lot," she said.

Zeiller recalls finding old auto motors and other debris that was just thrown around from people encroaching on the land during their cleanup process.

In 1961, a big New York City developer, Norman Blankman, suggested building cluster housing, office complexes and recreational areas in the same spot that Zeiller and her fellow residents were fighting so hard to preserve. His work had already been accepted in many parts of Long Island, and this nook on the Palisades was next on his list. However, the residents pushed back, and Blankman's plan was defeated.

Blankman sold the property to a residential construction company, Centex Homes in 1972 for \$9 million, which also pressed to develop and proposed building a 1,780-unit housing project on the land.

A communitywide effort got under way to raise enough money to buy the land. In 1976, the borough of [Tenafly](#) used all the collected funds plus a surprise \$1 million donation from the JCC on the Palisades to finally become the owners of the plot, which back then was still only 40 acres. They leased the property to the Nature Center to steward the land and preserve the habitat. In 2005, the land became the property of the Tenafly Nature Center.

Today, stretching across 380 acres, the [Tenafly](#) Nature Center is the largest in [Bergen County](#). (The [Closter/Demarest](#) Nature Center is 80 acres, [Englewood](#)'s Flat Rock Brook Nature Center is 150 acres and the Lorrimer Sanctuary in [Franklin Lakes](#) is 14 acres.)

According to Neus, the uniqueness of the [Tenafly](#) Nature Center is the experience of nature in a completely genuine way.

"You can find animals such as turkeys, migrating birds, deer and even fox in their natural habitat," he points out.

"I come here several times a year. There aren't too many people here right now, but I prefer it that way," said Gene Seligman of [Fort Lee](#) comparing the winter visits to summer ones when the parking lot is fuller.

Along with continuing programs with neighboring school districts and keeping the land safe, Neus wants to make sure that future generations will still see the importance of the [Tenafly](#) Nature Center in years to come.

"What we plan for the next 50 years is to build on the legacy we've inherited from the initial founders," he said. "We want to preserve open space for future generations and teach our children and our children's children the importance of connecting to and protecting nature."

Zeiller agrees.

"The people are taking such good care of it," she said. "It makes our hearts feel good that they're doing what they're doing."

On March 6, the Nature Center will host a gala dinner in celebration of its 50th anniversary, including a silent auction and the presentation of the Founders Award honoring those who made significant efforts toward the preservation of the natural environment in [Tenafly](#).

The actor and director Aidan Quinn will be the honorary chairman for the event. Tickets are \$100. For more information, visit www.tenaflynaturecenter.org.

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