



## a new look for an old city

Once again the holiday season for retailers and restaurateurs is approaching, and Cynthia Philo (Wilson Class, 1990) is finishing up plans for the second annual Sparkle Night shopping promotion in the Old City District of Philadelphia, Penn. At the same time, she's off to inspect trash cans at a city impound lot to determine if they will be appropriate for the street scape improvement project she's ready to implement. They're a nice shade of burgundy.

"I can't understand why the other organization didn't want them," she states.

She's bargaining for the Old City District on 30 rejects from the City of Philadelphia. "Let's get a contractor out here and set up an installation schedule to put them on the streets before the New Year's Eve festivities."

This month, Philo, the one-woman executive branch of the Old City Special Services District, celebrates her second anniversary on the job. Her kingdom covers 22 square blocks of the historic area of Philadelphia that encompasses the Liberty Bell, Independence Hall and some of the best restaurants, boutique retail and art galleries in Philadelphia.

In just two years, Philo has won a reputation for being a strong, inclusive leader and a quick study, for being adept at handling multiple tasks, and for getting things accomplished in booming Old City. With new restaurants sprouting on nearly every corner, a growing number of retailers moving in, an ever-expanding gallery scene, and apartment rents shooting up like geysers, Philo has her work cut out for her.

One of her top concerns is keeping the streets and

sidewalks of Old City “spiffy and attractive.” “The original goal was definitely to get things clean – sidewalk cleaning, graffiti removal, posters, stickers,” she said.

The street scape, lighting and parking are longer-term priorities. “We’re looking to increase the lighting down here,” Philo said. “When you put it in, it serves many purposes.”

The other goal is economic development, making this a place where people want to do business.

Philo, 34, grew up in Churchville, Penn. in Bucks County and graduated from Council Rock High in Newtown, Penn. After achieving a bachelor of arts degree from Millersville University, she wanted to go to law school but was unsure where to go.

“My father suggested that I call his brother, who is an attorney, for advice. Her uncle, Harry M. Philo, a partner in the Detroit firm of Philo, Atkinson, Stephens, Wright, Whittaker, Philo & Kayrouc, suggested that she visit the Midwest to experience another area of the country.

“He wanted to make sure that I went to a law school that was based in the reality of practicing law, not based solely on legal briefs,” stated Cynthia. “As a result I went to Cooley.”

“All I can remember hearing from my friends who were going to law school was, ‘You’re going to Cooley, isn’t that where they fail you out even after your second year?’ Everyone knew it was tough. I liked that reputation.”

Understanding the practical aspect of law while at Cooley served as an important lesson in going out into the world of work. After graduating from Cooley, she moved back home to Philadelphia and joined the law firm of Murphy & O’Connor. Using her Sixty-Plus Clinic experience, she became involved as a panel attorney for

the Senior Citizen Judicare Project, which provides pro bono legal assistance to Philadelphia’s poor and needy elderly.

She now serves as that organization’s Co-Vice Chairman. After six years with Murphy & O’Connor, insurance defense specialists, Philo decided to take some time off.

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“Civil defense litigation wasn’t the fit for me,” she said. “I went to law school to go into politics, not to practice law.” She became a Committee person for the Democrats for her neighborhood. While holding that position she was able to practice law for constituents in the area. From that position she then became one of the discovery court clerks for Common Pleas Court Judge Mary Colins.

Because it was a judicial position, Cynthia was unable to act politically.

“While I found the job interesting and educational, it wasn’t where I wanted to be.”

A year later, she applied for the Old City District executive director’s job, and the Board awarded her the post. Philo runs the organization solo, managing a clean team of 10 and two community service representatives, which keep Old City clean and safe for visitors, workers, and residents alike.

She also manages a budget of \$430,000 to employ the maintenance and marketing programs.

“I have to assess around 700 commercial properties to make my budget for each year. The assessment refers to the five percent property tax surcharge that commercial property owners in Old City are assessed to finance the special services district.

“It’s really not a five-day-a-week job,” she said. “If people see you and there’s a problem, they’ll pull you aside and tell you, ‘There’s graffiti here.’” When asked at random, about the current state of Old City, the merchants are often quick to bring up Philo’s name.

While Philo has plenty of ideas for marketing the district, she hedges on how long she’ll be around to execute them. “My plans are here, and then again you can’t say. You never know what comes up. Opportunities always present themselves, and you have to look at them,” she stated when asked if she’d consider running for political office.

For now, there’s plenty of action in Old City. In addition to restaurants, galleries, and new retail shops, Old City has attracted about a dozen e-commerce, Internet-start-up, and Web design businesses. And the word is spreading.

In the last few months, Philo said, she’s received several phone calls from out-of-state e-businesses that have heard about Old City, which lately has taken to sporting the sobriquet “New Media Village.”

Life beyond Cooley has proven to be very interesting indeed for Philo.

“There are so many things you can do with a law degree from Thomas M. Cooley,” states Philo. And with that, she’s back to running Old City Philadelphia. ■