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Ann Belser photo

Welcoming spring . . .

After a three-week delay, the Lunar New Year parade became the Spring Festival. To celebrate the day, Eak Kapab, left, and Anark Sangsub, both of Squirrel Hill, who are part of the staff of the Silk Elephant restaurant, perform a fire dance. **More photos on Page 8.**

Lawyer's grief spurs action for Indian school children

By Print

In the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election, Squirrel Hill attorney Christine Biancheria said she found herself faced with a choice.

"You can sit on Facebook and have a negativity negathon," she said. Or, she could concentrate on a school that is half a world away that is educating children out of the slums of Mumbai and giving them a shot at college and a life beyond.

It all started with a query: Where was Dilbur Parakh, and what was she doing now?

Biancheria had met Parakh in Geneva, Switzerland, during law school. Biancheria had

an international human rights fellowship at the International Commission of Jurists.

Parakh was working there as a lawyer, one of the most coveted jobs in the field of international law.

Biancheria, who had long since graduated, started her own firm with a friend but in 2016 her law partner died and she closed the firm. At one point, while considering her options she looked up the commission; everyone she had known was still working there, except Parakh.

Parakh, on a visit home, had seen the children

ASEEMA, page 5→



Photo courtesy of Christine Biancheria

With uniforms and rows of desks, the children from the slums of Mumbai are as dedicated to their studies as children at other schools in India.

Bike(+) plan will create safe routes for small vehicles

Commuters weigh in on 10-year blueprint

By Ann Belser

It was a dark and stormy night, really, and not a good one for biking.

Yet outside of The Shop in Homewood, about half a dozen bicycles were chained to the bike racks. Their riders were inside, talking about how to make their travels around the city safer.

The bicyclists who were riding on Tuesday, Feb. 25, were the hard core of the city's cycling world. Other people who came to comment, fairer weather cyclists, came by car or bus.

The purpose, however, was to create a city in which it is safe to bike or to use other lightweight vehicles, such as electric pedal assist bicycles, kick scooters or electric scooters.

The goal of Pittsburgh's Department of Mobility and Infrastructure is, as stated in the Bike(+) plan, to align with the city's mobility goal of ensuring that no one dies traveling on city streets.

Other goals are to allow all households to access fresh fruits and vegetables within 20 minutes of traveling from home without needing a private car; making walking and biking "the most joyful mode for short distance trips"; ensuring that no household has to spend more than 45% of its income for housing and transportation; and designing the city's streets and rights of way to "reflect the values of our community."

Currently, according to the plan, there are 70 miles of bike infrastructure, such as sharrows (for sharing the road), off-road trails, such as the Eliza Furnace Trail, and bike lanes. Bike lanes make up 40% of the bike infrastructure. Currently 2.1% of the city's commuters travel to work by bike.

BIKE(+), page 3→



Residents who attended the open house to comment on the new Bike(+) plan could do so by placing sticky notes on the maps that had the plan drawn on it. By the end of the evening the map was barely visible.

Book tells tales of a cemetery's 'residents'

By Jan Kurth

"From the very beginning," Lisa Speranza writes, "The grounds now occupied by The Homewood Cemetery have been a place of respite."

It is still a place of respite for East End residents who are out for a walk or an evening bike ride. And that was very much by the intent of the cemetery's original landscape architect, Adolphe Strauche. From the beginning, Speranza says, Strauche emphasized "a simplified, streamlined, open design that allowed for a more strictly conceptualized layout for all to enjoy."

But as Speranza demonstrates in her book "The Homewood Cemetery" (Arcadia Publishing, 2019), the lives of those now interred there were hardly restful or dull.

On the contrary, the cemetery is packed full of people who led vivid and memorable lives starting with Judge William Wilkins, who once owned the Homewood estate where the cemetery, which was founded in 1878, is now located.

Speranza highlights many of these fascinating individuals — some of whom were quite famous,



Print photo

A new history of Homewood Cemetery from Arcadia Press is filled with the lively tales of those who have died.

at least during their own lifetimes, while others were relatively obscure. While Henry Clay Frick is well known to most Pittsburghers, Homewood Cemetery includes a number or prominent businessmen that virtually no one would recognize today. Few probably remember David Lytle Clark, a confectioner by trade, but

quite a few have enjoyed a Clark Bar or a Zagnut Bar, both of which Clark developed.

Thanks to recent books like Mark Whittaker's "Smoketown: The Untold Story of the Other Great Black Renaissance" (Simon and Schuster,

HOMEWOOD CEMETERY, page 6→

Library celebrates the Pittsburgh Courier

By Print

Diane I. Daniels had always wanted to work for the Pittsburgh Courier.

It was the paper that changed the civil rights conversation: an African American newspaper that was so controversial, that in the 1920s and 1930s, Pullman Porters would hide it in the train and then deliver it to specific ministers down south so that segregationists would not seize the copies and burn them.

All of the great black intellectuals had written for the Courier in its heyday.

Daniels, who is now a freelance business writer for the New Pittsburgh Courier, spoke about her experience trying to get that job for the New Pittsburgh Courier after a screening of the 2009 documentary "Newspaper of Record: The Pittsburgh Courier 1907-1965." She was on a panel at the Homewood Branch of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh on Wednesday, Feb. 26, that was presented by the Friends of the Homewood Library.

The Pittsburgh Courier had more than 350,000 subscribers across the country in the decades before it filed for bankruptcy in 1965.

Daniels, who had grown up in McKeesport, had always wanted a job there.

"I am a civil rights baby. I was born in the '50s, so in the '50s and the '60s as I was growing

up I always remember reading the Courier and seeing those pictures they showed on the TV," she said.

The paper spoke out on the biggest issues of the day. In World War II, when the American Red Cross refused to accept blood from black donors for the troops, the Courier called them out.

When the organization changed its policy but refused to give blood from black donors to white soldiers, the Courier called them out again, and the Red Cross backed down from its racism.

And when soldiers who were fighting for freedom overseas were battling racism at home, the Pittsburgh Courier promoted its "Double V" campaign for victory overseas and civil rights victory at home.

The newspaper, which once printed 14 editions that were distributed across the country, took on lynching, voting rights, segregation and the Ku Klux Klan. There were two strong black newspapers at the time, the Courier and the Chicago Defender.

"That's something in which we can take some regional pride," said Cody McDevitt, a historian who spoke at a meeting Saturday, Feb. 29, of the Afro-American Historical & Genealogical Society of Pittsburgh.



Print photos
New Pittsburgh Courier Managing Editor Rob Taylor Jr. answers a question from the audience about the paper. While Ellen Sandidge, vice president of the Friends of Homewood Library, left, and Courier writer Diane Daniels, center, listen. Pictured below, left David Grinnell, coordinator of archives and manuscripts, for the University of Pittsburgh's library system, talked about the artifacts from the Courier that are in the university's archives.

McDevitt, who was giving a talk on his book, "Banished from Johnstown: Racist Backlash in Pennsylvania," noted the importance of the Courier in documenting the story of two weeks in 1923 when more than 2,000 African Americans and Mexicans were forced out of Johnstown by men with guns who threatened to throw them in prison if they did not leave.

Daniels was well aware of the importance of the Courier and said every Wednesday and Saturday, when she was in college at Wilberforce University in Ohio, she would go to the library to read what was happening at home.

During her college years, Daniels said, she applied for cooperative internships at the Courier, and was turned down, but wound up writing for other newspapers in Ohio.

When she graduated, she came home and applied to both the McKeesport Daily News, where she lived, and the New Pittsburgh Courier, which was her dream job.

The Daily News had never had a black reporter. Retired Supreme Court Justice Cynthia Baldwin, who was at that time an

attorney but was also Daniel's Sunday school teacher, lobbied the paper to give her a job.

Daniels got the job at the Daily News. The same day she received an offer from the New Pittsburgh Courier.

"I had to turn down my dream job," she said. Instead, she wrote for the Daily News as the first black reporter there.

Now she profiles black-owned businesses for the Courier while running her own public relations firm.

The Pittsburgh Courier declared bankruptcy in 1965. In 1966 a new black newspaper, the New Pittsburgh Courier was started.

The new newspaper maintains the same crusading spirit.

For the last 10 years it has unflinchingly documented homicides in the black community every month. It covered the deaths at the hands of police of both black businessman Jonny Gammage and Antwon Rose, a black teenager. Most recently it has followed the story of Allegheny County Common Pleas Judge Mark Tranquilly who has been accused of making racist remarks.



An escape from negativity leads to helping a school

← page 1, ASEEMA

begging at traffic lights and, while the problems of poverty is vast in India, she had to do something.

Biancheria said she was struck by something Parakh said: "Let's not look at the grand big picture. Let's look at what we as individuals can do in our own right."

Parakh decided to educate children.

First, she had to gain the trust of the parents and find a place to teach the children. She found a high school that was willing to allow her to use a room after hours. The first class opened in 1997.

The school is called Aseema, which means "limitless" in Sanskrit.

The children from the slums were not used to school. They did not know, for instance, how to stand in line, or sit and listen to lessons. They did not have the fine motor skills to hold pencils or crayons.

India, Biancheria noted, has 1.4 billion people and a quarter of them are under the

age of 18, which means that the population of children who need to go to school is greater than the population of our entire country.

Instead of using rote learning methods, Aseema uses the teaching methods of Maria Montessori, allowing the children to work at their own pace on their own interests.

After that first class, the city allowed her to use a rundown municipal school for Aseema.

The school system now has three municipal schools in Mumbai and has opened a fourth school in the tribal area of Igatpuri where there was nothing for the children.

The results show that the school is serving the children.

In India at the end of high school, the children take an exam to obtain their Secondary School Certificate (SSC). For municipal schools across Mumbai, the SSC pass rate is 53%. When private schoolchildren are added into that mix, the pass rate is 74%. But the children who have been through Aseema pass the SSC at a rate of 93% and

they either all go onto higher education or vocational training.

Biancheria, who has now been to India twice to see the program, has formed a nonprofit, Friends of Aseema, to help Parakh

educate the children there. The nonprofit is seeking 501(c)(3) status.

To find out about donating to Friends of Aseema, contact Biancheria at info@friendsofaseema.org.



Photos courtesy of Christine Biancheria
Above, a student at the Aseema school. Below, Christine Biancheria, left, at dinner with the founders of Aseema, from left, Neela Kapadia, Dilbur Parakh, and Snehal Paranjape.



To recruit students to the Aseema school, Dilbur Parakh, one of the founders of the school, spent time in the city's slums talking to parents and gaining their trust.



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