

George's Coffee Club keeping George Mitchell's legacy alive

By: Liz Grimm

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Barbara and Don Gebert, founding Interfaith Executive Director and his wife (front row); Jeff Harris and Roger Galatas, George's Coffee Club founders; Dr. Ann Snyder, past Interfaith CEO; Dan Hauser, past Interfaith board member; and current Interfaith CEO Missy Herndon (back row).

THE WOODLANDS, Texas -- A year after its formation, George's Coffee Club has been busy with its mission to "honor, respect and communicate George

Mitchell's vision for The Woodlands.”

The club is a non-profit organization formed to share factual information about George Mitchell's significant leadership and contribution in the development of The Woodlands, which has gained international recognition as a quality “New Town.”

The group gathers monthly to communicate and discuss historical information as well as the evolution and impact of modern issues to not only long-time residents of The Woodlands but to new residents and the emerging younger adult population as well.

It was initially established a year ago by Roger Galatas, past President of The Woodlands Development Company, along with Tom Cox, a long-term custom homebuilder in the community, and Jeff Harris, former Senior Vice President of Administration for The Woodlands Corporation.

Membership has now expanded to approximately 40 active participants who either knew Mitchell or are now in leadership roles in the community.

“In my judgment, and of many others, the single most important factor in the success of The Woodlands was its founding developer George Mitchell,” said Galatas. “His vision, tenacity, compassion, charitable nature, concern for the environment and willingness to take financial risk all combined to define the George Mitchell I knew and had the great opportunity to work with for some 20 years.”

Galatas points out that Mitchell was a community builder, not just a developer of lots and commercial property.

He understood the need for and demanded quality of design to establish a ‘community where people could live, work, play and learn.’

He explained that Mitchell traveled the U.S. as a member of YPO (Young Presidents' Organization) in the 1960's and early 1970's and saw social unrest and economic decline in several major cities that raised his concern about future growth in Houston which didn't have comprehensive regional planning.

Residents within the city of Houston started moving out to residential neighborhoods in the suburbs located along existing county roads which eventually became congested with traffic and cluttered with retail strip centers and billboards, and which continued to deteriorate over time.

He wanted to develop a "solution" for the Houston region and saw master-planned communities coming to the forefront as an example of a better living environment for residents to enjoy and a model for others to utilize.

He saw that well-planned, well-financed master-planned communities with development and environmental standards imposed by restrictive covenants as a major correction to Houston's regional development woes.

Mitchell acquired the land for The Woodlands, which was initially 17,500 acres and later expanded to 28,000 acres.

He recruited the initial professional team including architects, urban planners, environmental planners, engineers and business professionals to plan and develop The Woodlands.

When The Woodlands opened on Oct. 19, 1974 the total population of the entire Montgomery County was 50,000.

From that modest beginning, The Woodlands alone has grown to include a resident population of approximately 110,000 and a major economic center with more than 50,000 jobs.

“By sharing information about the original development concept George Mitchell had 40-plus years ago for creating The Woodlands and what it has become today, we aim to leave an enhanced legacy for our younger members and new residents. As an organization we don’t get into political elections and campaigns. We’re an educational, non-political group. We simply want to broaden community awareness of George Mitchell in a factual way,” said Galatas.

Karen West, retired Vice President and General Counsel of The Woodlands Development Company and member of George’s Coffee Club steering committee, explained, “Those of us who knew and worked with George Mitchell for many years believe it’s important to keep his vision for The Woodlands alive. Mr. Mitchell was a great man and a true visionary. He made sure that we had all the elements of an excellent master planned community like healthcare, private and public education, churches, charitable organizations, entertainment venues, and public spaces. We are pleased to see so many young people carry on Mr. Mitchell’s legacy by taking an active role in the community. At the coffee club meetings, we not only discuss our history, we tie it to what’s happening today and learn how Mr. Mitchell’s vision and legacy is being carried forward into the future as The Woodlands continues to thrive and prosper.”

Justin Kendrick, Vice President of Operations for Memorial Hermann The Woodlands Hospital and member of the Club, added, “It has been important to me to be involved with this group and gain an understanding and respect of the history about where we live, work and operate today from the pillars of our community. As a person in a leadership position at a local hospital, I’ve gained insight into where we’ve been, who we are now, and who we can become as an organization that is shaping the future. I believe it is important to learn about the history and background of those who’ve been here since the beginning, as they are an invaluable resource to tap as we move toward the

future in a respectful way.”

The array of topics covered by guest speakers at the monthly meetings include:

- Education
- Health care
- Public safety
- Environment
- Transportation
- Religious institutions
- Economic development
- Community governance
- Charitable organizations
- Parks and recreation
- Golf events
- Art in public places
- Performing arts and art festivals.

The presentations often show historical photos that have been archived over the years by Ted Washington during his tenure as “photographer of The Woodlands.”

Offering more historical information, Roger Galatas has authored a book with Jim Barlow entitled “The Woodlands: The Inside Story of Creating a Better Hometown” published by the Urban Land Institute and available on Amazon.com.

Galatas has recently been invited by the Harvard Graduate School of Design to actively participate in its “Toward Twenty-First Century New Towns Conference” which will publish a book covering “New Towns” around the world including The Woodlands.