

Inspiration

...where philanthropy begins

A woman with a red headwrap and a man in a blue striped shirt are standing next to a large solar panel array. The woman is on the left, wearing a green floral shirt and black pants, with her arms crossed. The man is on the right, wearing a blue and black striped shirt, blue jeans, and a black cap with 'NAVY' on it. He is leaning against the solar panel array. The background shows a clear blue sky and a brick building.

Environmental Equity

Across the region, foundations are bringing people together to combat the threat climate change presents to vulnerable communities – and build resiliency. | Page 3

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Over the last 50 years, SECF members have embraced new tools, new strategies and new priorities. | Page 6

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One family foundation is leading an effort to preserve affordable housing in its community. | Page 9



Bringing People to the Table

By Peter Panepento



In suburban Atlanta, one family foundation is organizing a campaign to preserve affordable housing.

Melanie and David Couchman are proving that you can, indeed, fight City Hall.

It just takes a little bit of philanthropy — and a lot of perseverance.

The Couchmans — who founded and run a small family foundation in suburban Atlanta — have a long track record of investing their time and money to improve their community.

Their Couchman-Noble Foundation, created by the couple in 2004 after they sold a successful software company, invests in efforts such as a promising after-school program at a middle school that helps underserved youth in their hometown of Sandy Springs, Georgia.

They also have an active fund at the Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta that provides critical support to a number of small, community-based nonprofits. And they give countless hours to their community by serving on a number of nonprofit boards.

“The Couchmans aren’t just generous with their money. They are generous with their knowledge and their time,” says Alicia Philipp, president of the Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta. “The number of lives they’ve touched through their philanthropy is inspiring.”

But their latest effort is perhaps their most selfless act.

Fighting for the Future of Sandy Springs

In 2018, Melanie and David agreed to volunteer as co-chairs of a task force that was charged with creating a redevelopment plan for a key section of Sandy Springs. The 14-member task force, which worked in partnership with city government, included nine members who were connected to commercial real estate development — and did not fully represent the interests of the full community, David Couchman says.

Ultimately, the task force approved a plan that would bulldoze thousands of out-of-date apartment units to help make way for newer, more upscale housing and commercial development.

On the surface, the plan made sense for the city. It would lead to a rush of new investment, expand the local tax base, and improve property values for its neighbors.

Melanie and David, however, saw a big downside. While it would help create a wave of shiny new developments to Sandy Springs, it would do so at the expense of thousands of local families, most of whom would be unable to afford the high rents and big mortgages that would be attached to the new development.

“If Sandy Springs moves forward with this plan, they would be setting a precedent that is very dangerous for affordable housing in other communities — especially those with large blocks of naturally occurring affordable housing,” Melanie says. “This would be massive gentrification on a large scale.”

What’s more, Melanie and David believed that those who would be most affected by

In fact, they’re doubling down on their opposition and are using their foundation — and their clout — to try to educate their neighbors about what’s at stake.

“We decided that since we’ve built a lot of social equity in this community that we should focus that social equity on educating the broader community,” Melanie Couchman said. “A lot of people aren’t aware of what’s happening.”

Sandy Springs Together

To help generate that awareness, the Couchman-Noble Foundation decided to devote the bulk of its effort toward a new project called Sandy Springs Together.

Sandy Springs Together, which was



Melanie Couchman (standing) and other leaders of Sandy Springs Together review affordable housing currently available in the city and proposals that could limit its future availability.

the plan were not properly informed about what it would mean to them.

As co-chairs of the task force, they were vocally against the plan — and pleaded with their fellow members to explore other options.

Ultimately, they lost the battle.

The plan was approved — and the stage was set for a massive redevelopment plan that would gentrify a community they loved.

But while that battle was lost, Melanie and David aren’t conceding.

founded in February, is a public awareness campaign that aims to help lower- and middle-income residents in the Atlanta suburb understand what’s at stake with the redevelopment plan and motivate them to take action.

While Sandy Springs Together is still in its infancy, Melanie and David have moved quickly to get it off the ground. They’ve played host to public information sessions, created a website and social media presence and hired public relations help to spread the word.

Because it’s a foundation-funded effort,



Sandy Springs resident Melody Kelley (left) meets with Melanie and David Couchman outside her apartment, which could be at risk if a proposed development goes through.

two to three jobs and have multiple children who require lots of attention,” she says.

Those who stand to profit, however, know that they have the upper hand because those who would be affected by their plans are unaware of what’s at stake, David Couchman says.

“It’s an equity issue,” David says. “It’s a fairness issue.”

Early Progress

But because of the early work of Sandy Springs Together, the balance of power is already shifting.

Kelly and many of her neighbors have started attending public hearings and raising opposition to parts of the plan.

And the city has been listening.

In May, it put out a request for proposals for a project that would focus on redeveloping four underutilized shopping centers, rather than the initial plan to raze existing residential housing.

The RFP suggests that as many as 1,200 apartments units are at least temporarily safe, Melanie Couchman says.

Even better, the city has scheduled 10 public meetings as part of the process — a sign that it is giving the community ample opportunity to shape the project.

“It means we’re having an impact,” Melanie says. “If you put enough perseverance and elbow grease behind it, you can move elected officials to do the right thing.”

But while they consider this an early victory — and are cautiously optimistic about the process moving forward — David says it will require a long-term effort to succeed.

And, he says, the foundation recognizes that what’s happening in Sandy Springs is happening in many other places, too.

Throughout the South — and across the United States — philanthropy can play a key role in working with government and the public to preserve and expand affordable housing.

“This is a long-term play. Success isn’t going to happen overnight,” Melanie says. “We are just one foundation — a small foundation — and we need to have others who want to stand with us.” ■

Melanie and David say they are careful not to lobby or advocate. Instead, they say they are trying to help their neighbors understand what’s being proposed and what is at stake.

As a result, they’re leaving their personal feelings about the redevelopment effort at the door and are instead simply providing those who would be directly affected by the new development with information about how their housing might be at risk. It means showing the business community the potential economic impact that might come with displacing their customers and workers. It means working with nonprofits to help them understand forces that would impact the people they serve.

From there, they hope people, whether residents at the grassroots or influential community leaders at the treetops, will get involved in government hearings and make their voices heard — regardless of where they stand on the plan.

“We’re not here to advocate, we’re here to educate,” David Couchman says. “Ultimately, we want to give people the opportunity to make up their own minds on the issue. But we need to give them the information so they can decide.”

What’s at Stake?

By most measures, Sandy Springs — a city of 107,000 in the shadow of Atlanta — is a thriving, growing community. It’s home to headquarters for major corporations such as UPS and Cox Communications, as well as the American headquarters for

Mercedes-Benz. It’s also home to a number of families, such as the Couchmans, who have launched successful businesses and lucrative careers.

But part of what makes Sandy Springs a good place to live is the fact that it offers people like Melody Kelly a safe, affordable place to raise children in a good school district.

Kelly, who recently completed her post-graduate education, is starting her career as a chemistry professor while raising her middle-school aged daughter. They live in

“It’s an equity issue... It’s a fairness issue.”

Couchman-Noble Foundation

one of the apartment buildings that would be targeted for redevelopment under the plan developed by the task force, which means she would likely need to displace her daughter and move to another community before she finished high school.

“I’d like to keep [my daughter] in the district so she can stay with her friends,” Kelly says. “But I’m concerned. So, I’m trying to be as vigilant as possible and making sure my voice is heard.”

Before Melanie and David started their effort, Kelly said she and her neighbors were largely unaware of what was at stake.

“A lot of my neighbors are too busy to follow what’s been happening. They are working