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Bringing Back The Music

"Green" building consultant Jen Souder grew up in Kinnelon. Now she's helping Asbury Park preserve a storied tradition—and an unforgettable cultural venue.

When the Turf Club opened on Asbury Park's Springwood Avenue in 1955, Jen Souder wasn't yet born. But the 1991 Kinnelon High School grad, a professional "green" building consultant and a relentless volunteer, is helping to restore that famous club to the glory it enjoyed in that long-ago era. She is the board president of Asbury Park African-American Music Project (AP-AMP). Married with two children in Asbury Park, the 51-year-old Souder recently shared thoughts with MORRIS & ESSEX about what the project means to her.

You grew up in Kinnelon in Morris County. What drew you to Asbury Park in 2009?

It was a very diverse community with a lot of music and culture and, of course, the ocean. If you want to be involved in the community, it's a great place to do so.

Is there anything about your Kinnelon experience that shaped your interest in green planning, music or what you're doing today with the Turf Club?

Without a doubt, growing up in the woods and lakes of Kinnelon guided my education and career path toward natural resources, ecology and landscape architecture. As long as I can remember, I've been interested in the layers of community history and how the stories of a community are (or are not!) preserved and shared. I've always appreciated how music can connect people and have sought out opportunities to hear live music wherever I am.

Why is the Turf Club special?

It's the last standing music venue on Springwood Avenue in Asbury Park, and Springwood Avenue is the heart of the city's historic African American community.

Tell us about the club's glory days.

Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald and other jazz greats passed through Springwood Avenue. A little bit later, George Benson and Clarence Clemons played



Yvonne Clayton (left) and Jennifer Souder, Asbury Park African-American Music Project, 2023.

there. Clemons went on, of course, to play with Bruce Springsteen.

What led to the area's decline?

Because of a lot of change over time—civil unrest, disinvestment—the physical fabric of that neighborhood has changed a lot. There's very little left physically where we can go to remember that history.

I understand the Kinnelon community, and even your parents, shared your vision.

Yes! I am so grateful for the support from my family and Kinnelon friends. My parents live in my childhood home and have been supportive of AP-AMP from the start. After watching it grow and hearing endlessly about the urgency to preserve the Turf Club, without saying a word to me (or anyone), my parents, Nancy and Bob Ward, put a check in the mail to AP-AMP that enabled us to make an earnest money deposit and secure the purchase of the Turf Club.

How have others in Morris County supported the Turf Club?

My brother, Rob Ward, is the president of Anserve Inc., a telephone answering service in Butler, which has been owned and operated by the Wards for over 50 years. The Anserve team has been a leading supporter of AP-AMP's initiatives and events through donations, sponsorships and raising awareness about its mission. I am very fortunate to have close childhood friends from Kinnelon (some who still live there) who have come down to Asbury Park to attend AP-AMP events and support our efforts in many ways.

I understand the club now has a roof. What's next?

The whole project is about \$2.5 million, to open the doors and have an operating budget and all those things. We've raised about \$500,000. We're in the phase of completing the exterior restoration. We'd love to be able to say that in 2026 we'll complete the work. But we don't have the money yet so I can't say it confidently.

I hear Springsteen donated \$100,000.

We did get a very generous donation from Springsteen last fall. He reached out to us.

He had done a photo shoot with music photographer Danny Clinch in the Turf Club in 2023. Springsteen's name got us more visibility, which helps to reach many more people—a very big deal for us.

When not working on projects like this, how do you spend your time? You mentioned you have two school-aged children, Morgan and Malcolm.

We do fun things around Asbury Park. Being part of the community, they also get dragged around to all sorts of activities and meetings. [Souder serves on the library and planning boards.] I'm actually very happy they've had the opportunity.

How can the community lend its support?

We're always looking for donations to help us with the next phase, so you can go to our website: asburyamp.org. We always need volunteers, and we also love people to share their stories.

—Donna Rolando