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Music Is Her Turf

“Green” building consultant and tireless volunteer Jen Souder leads the effort to restore a historic Asbury Park club.

The Stone Pony isn't the only iconic music venue in Asbury Park. The Turf Club is returning to its rightful place on the musical map, thanks to the Asbury Park African-American Music Project and Jen Souder, 51, its board president and founding member, as well as the community she's quick to credit.

Still a legend in the minds of many, the Turf Club opened on Springwood Avenue in 1955 and became the African American hub of jazz, blues and R&B. Memories of those days, which Souder and others are gathering as oral histories, provide inspiration to restore the club.

MONMOUTH caught up with Souder to ask about the project.

Why is the Turf Club special?

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

Tell us about the area'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 there.

Clemons went on 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 there's a team working to gather Springwood oral histories. What sense of magic arises from these stories?

The feeling was that you walked down the street and you would just hear music on every corner because the doors of these clubs would be open.

How did it go from histories to “Let's save this place”?

The primary catalyst was City Councilwoman Yvonne Clayton. She and I went to the National Trust for Historic Preservation conference in San Francisco and talked about this history. As we



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

were showing slides of Springwood Avenue, we mentioned that the Turf Club was there. And people in the room said, “Well, what are you doing to preserve it if it's the last one?”

And you raised \$125,000 to buy the club?

We didn't have a lot of money at the time. The owner was very, very patient and generous in the sense that he did eventually sell it to us.

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.

How does this tie in with your work at the Rutgers Center for Urban Policy Research and as a green building consultant at Greener by Design?

My professional career has been focused on integrating cultural heritages and sustainability into the built environment. [And at the Turf Club] I work with our architect and contractor to help manage the design and construction.

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.

When not working on projects like this, how do you spend your time?

You mentioned you're married with 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.

Can folks experience the Turf Club before opening day?

Even with no roof and no power there've been magical evenings—each Tuesday in summer we would have music in the evening, and we're doing that again this summer, although it isn't physically at the club because it's in construction.

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