

P NORTHWEST PASSAGES

THE PEOPLE AND PLACES OF NORTHWEST WASHINGTON

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Spreading the Irish good word on St. Patrick's Day

By **TERESA G. GIONIS**
Current Correspondent

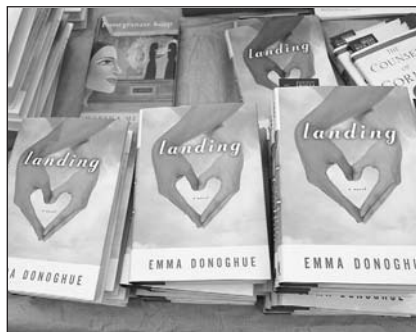
“Would you like a free Irish novel for St. Patrick's Day?”

Dennis Houlihan, stationed outside the Dupont Circle Metro station beside a card table blanketed with books, asks the same question dozens of times over the course of his three-hour shift.

For the most part, those in the crowds busily scurry forward without slowing their pace, avoiding eye contact and making small

adjustments to their iPod headphones. The ones who do stop or express curiosity are rewarded with a brand-new book.

“They're free. No strings attached,” Houlihan says as he encourages a small group to select a book. He gently nudges the hesitant along. “The idea is to experiment a little, take a risk,” he says. “The price is right — so you really have nothing to lose. Just spread the word about us, that's all we ask.”



The book-taker responses vary from cagey suspicion to warm gratitude to perfunctory snatching. Several people, many Irish-born, stop for lengthier chats, and Houlihan quickly bonds with a slightly disheveled Irish history professor from Catholic University.

Houlihan sits on the board of Solas Nua (Gaelic for “new light”), which bills itself as the only U.S. organization dedicated to contemporary Irish arts. For the fourth consecutive year, Solas Nua took to the streets of downtown Washington

on St. Patrick's Day to shower the public with fine Irish literature — for free. About 25 volunteers worked throughout the city on street corners and near Metro stops. Five thousand works of literature were distributed.

“What better way to promote contemporary Irish literature than by literally putting books into the hands of D.C. residents?” the organization asks in its press materials.

Irish Book Day was the idea of



Ross Lee Tabak/The Current

Dennis Houlihan gives out free books by Irish authors as part of Solas Nua's Irish Book Day event. About 25 volunteers scattered throughout the District gave out 5,000 works of literature.

Solas Nua artistic director Linda Murray, who founded the organization four years ago and now operates it out of Flashpoint at 9th and G streets NW. Murray also selected the 15-odd book titles that were distributed at the event.

Solas Nua is also a prolific theater company, currently wrapping up the run of “Pumpgirl” at Flashpoint's Mead Theatre Lab. Past productions include “Disco Pigs,” “Bedbound,” “Howie the

Rookie” and “Scenes From the Big Picture.”

A Dublin native, Murray created Solas Nua when assigned to write a feature story on the Irish theater scene in Washington.

“I came here to do doctoral work in dance studies at the Library of Congress,” she explains. “I got sidelined into this when writing a story for an Irish theater magazine on the Irish arts scene in D.C. Basically, it didn't

exist.”

Thus inspired, Murray got together with colleagues and essentially created her own scene. “We have been growing this ever since,” she said. “We are continually working to expand the programming.”

In addition to the contemporary Irish plays and book events, Solas Nua holds annual film festivals, sponsors monthly book

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PAL group shares pups with retirees

By **LINDA LOMBARDI**
Current Correspondent

The residents are mostly dozing in their wheelchairs in front of a nature video, next to a sign reminding them of the date and the season, when the volunteers from PAL come into the room with their dogs. It's the regular Tuesday morning visit at the assisted-living facility at the Armed Forces Retirement Home, and many of the residents are familiar to volunteer leader Pat Wells. She points out one woman who's beaming at a volunteer and her small dog. “I've been visiting her since the beginning,” Wells says. “She can be sleeping — we wake her up. Every time she just comes to life.”

PAL — it stands for “People, Animals, Love” — is dedicated to sharing the joy of animals, but there's more to it than that. The owner of a Nova Scotia duck-tolling retriever is having a long conversation with one



Ross Lee Tabak/The Current

Rascal visits with Mike Staso, a resident at the Armed Forces Retirement Home.

man as the dog stands behind her, apparently content with being ignored for the moment. “Often the dog is just a catalyst,” says Wells. “The first time I took pictures, I was surprised at how few were petting the

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HOME & GARDEN

Casey Trees offers ‘treescape’ makeovers

By **AILEA SNELLER**
Current Correspondent

With their neatly trimmed dark beards and pressed plaid shirts,

Jim Woodworth and Matthew Fried have the aura of enlightened urban lumberjacks. But rather than chopping down trees and rolling them down rivers, Fried and Woodworth endeavor to nurture and restore the District's tree canopy through their work with Casey Trees.

About 25

District residents gathered at Casey Trees' office last Wednesday night for a free workshop called “Design Your Yard With Trees.” Local homeowners from neighborhoods

ranging from Georgetown to Brookland learned how to enhance their landscape, cut energy costs and decrease water runoff by planting trees on their properties. As a bonus, participants got to choose a free

shade tree to be delivered to their home for planting.

The organization will hold a second “treescape” workshop tomorrow from 6:30 to 9 p.m. at 1123 11th St. NW, Unit 3. (Details are at caseytrees.org.)

Woodworth is Casey Trees' director of tree planting and urban stewardship, and he lists “shoveling

truckloads of mulch” among his cherished hobbies.

“We look at the District as an urban for- See **Trees**/Page 25



Courtesy of Casey Trees

Casey Trees' Jim Woodworth

TREES

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est,” Woodworth told Wednesday night’s crowd, showing a slide of a satellite image of Washington’s tree canopy, which covers almost 40 percent of the city’s land. “And I want to encourage you to think about your neighborhood forest.”

Fried, Casey’s urban forestry manager, led participants through the nuts and bolts of choosing a tree and planting it in the right spot to minimize hazards and maximize aesthetic and environmental appeal. The three-hour workshop ended with smaller group sessions, where participants got individualized attention from the facilitators, who

pored over photos and sketches of front, back and side yards and helped develop an arboreal vision for each plot.

Maura Polli, an attorney who lives in Petworth, participated in the homeowner’s workshop last fall. She said in a phone interview that she found the nuts-and-bolts approach to planting and caring for a tree “very useful The process is a mystery if you don’t know much about trees.” She chose both a river birch and a black gum tree for her property after the workshop. “It was perfect for what I needed,” she said.

Joan Mackenzie, who took the workshop last summer, called it “an excellent program.” The Penn Branch resident opted to plant a Japanese maple in her side yard.

Fried and Woodworth both exude an

infectious reverence for trees, with Woodworth saying things like “Of the oaks, it’s the most majestic,” about a particular species of white oak. They’re the types who use terms like “overmulching,” “taproot” and “drip line” in daily conversation, and Fried explains that young trees “have memory” as he gently demonstrates the proper method for massaging the dirt from the tangled root system. They hope to translate their enthusiasm into concrete environmental benefits for District residents. Highlighting the purified air, healthier soil and picturesque scenery that surround trees, Woodworth calls them an “emerging force for change in our neighborhoods.”

Casey Trees works on a variety of programs, including recruiting “Citizen

Foresters” — District volunteers who help with tree-planting projects and community education on conservation and environmental stewardship. The group conducts monitoring and mapping projects of tree sites in the city, and works on landscaping projects and low-impact development strategies with schools, businesses, churches and other organizations.

Casey Trees was founded as a District-based nonprofit in 2001 “to restore, enhance and protect the tree canopy of the Nation’s Capital.” The tree planning class, held twice each spring and twice each fall, is part of the District’s Department of the Environment storm-water management strategy, which aims to prevent runoff and stem pollution.

PAL

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dogs.”

There’s plenty of petting, for sure, but conversations take many turns, from stories about residents’ former pets to a gentleman who is overheard explaining that there are two kinds of copperhead snakes. And the value of the human interaction isn’t just for the residents; it’s a break for the staff and a social outing for the volunteers as well. In fact, Wells is here without a dog. She kept on coming after her first dog developed health problems and was unable to join her, and now she leads this visit while her current German Shepherd puppy is too young to participate.

“I got started after 9/11. I wanted to volunteer,” explains Wells, a resident of American University Park who is retired from Fannie Mae and now on the board of PAL. “The dog trainer I was using at the time said, ‘Share your dog with others.’”

The group, which has been visiting the Armed Forces home for 25 years, along with 24 other facilities in the D.C. area, is a nonprofit that has been around since 1981. An almost all-volunteer organization currently numbering around 200, it has only two full-time staffers.

What’s a little different about PAL from some pet-therapy programs is that this organization does not require extensive training. “We want to make it as easy



Ross Lee Tabak/The Current

Border terrier Mopsy visits with a resident.

for people as we can, as long as it’s safe,” says executive director Rene Wallis. If your animal is well-mannered and enjoys interacting with people — and you do, too — you can join in. The first step is attending an orientation with your pet. (Other pets are welcome, but right now most participants are dogs.) “At the orientation there are a lot of animals and

a lot going on,” Wallis says. “If the animal can handle that, it’s a pretty good indication.”

The next step is to go on a couple of observed visits. “Each site has its own personality,” Wallis says. Some have more rules and restrictions; some are suitable for more or less energetic animals. Location can also be a factor, although some are not deterred by a little inconvenience — one of the Tuesday volunteers drives in from Woodbridge twice a week with his Labrador retriever.

The Armed Forces home, which has both assisted-living and independent-living facilities, is one site that’s fairly casual and flexible. Wells tells of one time when the group was called in for an extra visit, after Katrina, when residents from a facility in Gulfport, Miss., were moved here. “They were shell-shocked — they didn’t talk to anyone,” she says. The staff “called and said, ‘We need some dogs out

here.” Staffers said later that the visit was a turning point in the relationship between the Gulfport and D.C. residents.

The visits last about an hour. The time is spread out among many residents, and some may question what good a five-minute visit can do, but Wells says the effects last longer: “They remember it the next day, they all talk about it, and there’s buzz a couple of days before we come.”

And for some, those five minutes make a big difference.

“There’s one woman on the fourth floor — she only smiles when we come,” she said.

PAL will hold two new-volunteer orientations this month: Saturday, March 21, from 10 to 11 a.m. at the Lisner-Louise-Dickson-Hurt Retirement Home, 5425 Western Ave. NW; and Saturday, March 28, from 10 to 11 a.m. at the Armed Forces Retirement Home, Rock Creek Church Road and Upshur Street NW. For more information, call 202-966-2171 or visit peopleanimalslove.org.

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