

Happy Birthday ANJEC

Celebrating 40 Years of Green Leadership

Reminiscing with Candy Ashmun

By **Valerie Walsh**, ANJEC volunteer and member,
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Commission

Candace (Candy) Ashmun became ANJEC's first Executive Director in early 1976 and has served in one capacity or another ever since. She was the organization's singular employee at the beginning, sharing an office with the NJ Conservation Foundation downstairs from ANJEC's current location at 300 Mendham Road in Morris Township. At that time, ANJEC had not yet acquired nonprofit status.

Candy was always full of pioneering spirit, as evidenced by her service as the founding chair of the Bedminster Environmental Commission from 1969 until 1976. She also worked concurrently for the Upper Raritan Watershed Association, where she tested water at 52 stations in the Raritan Basin and first began developing a Resource Center – a concept she brought with her to ANJEC.

Candy says she considers the Resource Center pivotal to ANJEC's mission. Realized through her dedication and hard work in securing funding for it, she believes the Resource Center has become an invaluable resource for information and empowerment for environmental commissions (ECs), other environmental groups and the public.

According to Candy, ANJEC helped bridge the gap of environmental leadership that existed when the NJDEP Office of Environmental Services was temporarily dissolved during the State's fiscal crisis in the mid 1970s. Her initial role at ANJEC was performing EC educational outreach and pulling together with the environmental community in the absence of State leadership and guidance.

In those early days, she recalls being "eager and able to take my own experience and create a support organization to provide training and information for existing commissions and find ways to help towns understand the value of local ECs and create their own."

Early on, ANJEC gained a national reputation by developing the materials and staff to conduct training for environmental commissions. "We developed our own training programs and then were funded by EPA (US Environmental Protection Agency) to expand that training to nine other states," recalls Candy. At that time ANJEC was able to offer tuition-free training, with particular emphasis on environmental resource inventories.



Candy Ashmun

In the early days, when almost all EC members were new to the job and knowledge about protecting the local environment was hard to come by, ANJEC's annual Environmental Commissioners Course was a 10-week training.

In 1976, after a new Municipal Land Use Law required local planning boards to start sending their environmental commissions a copy of every development proposal, ANJEC added site plan review to its training, which was an innovative concept at the time.

Candy said she always realized "...how valuable all the individual nonprofit organizations were, not only to the residents of New Jersey, but also to its newly constituted Department of Environmental Protection." She and Helen Fenske, an ANJEC founder, frequently visited NJDEP, cultivating lasting relationships. Together they broke new ground in securing grants from benefactors such as the Ford and Victoria Foundations that made it possible to expand ANJEC and get more programs moving. They also started the Environmental Collegium, a consortium of New Jersey environmental groups that continues today as the Environmental Summit.

Just as ANJEC was being called upon to recruit and train hundreds of newly sworn-in municipal environmental commissioners and provide support for many burgeoning grassroots organizations, the country found itself in a deep recession, Candy recalls. "Bad as the economy was, the Comprehensive Employment Training Act (CETA) provided a kind of federal stimulus program that saved the day. The program was designed to provide nonprofit organizations with


support staff. It brought ANJEC the talent and energy of 21 young college students to help us continue providing materials and individualized attention throughout New Jersey. Historians, biologists, teachers, artists, writers – we had them all. What a start that was!" Some of those people went on to long careers in the environmental field, Candy adds.

Asked if she ever thought ANJEC might not succeed, she emphatically replied, "No, I never thought it would fail, but I don't think I ever realized how hard it would be to keep finding funders, because towns, then as now, couldn't afford huge membership dues." She found that the never-ending quest to obtain foundation grants was arduous because funding organizations needed time to come to see ANJEC as a stable, productive entity.

Looking to the present and future, Candy says, "I am very proud that ANJEC is what it is these years later. I'm proud of ANJEC for always sticking with

having a Board made up of working stiffs from the ECs. And the staff – more needed than ever – is fabulous."

Candy left her position as ANJEC's executive director in 1982 to devote more attention to the Pinelands Commission, to which she was appointed in 1979. But she's never really left ANJEC, and has continued on as a volunteer, consultant and head cheerleader ever since.

Candy gratefully acknowledges that "we have been so fortunate to attract talented people who know a cause when they see one and never flinch in facing yet one more crisis." 



Candy's first office as ANJEC's executive director was a card table in the New Jersey Conservation Foundation quarters.

See ANJEC Anniversary Celebration – page 30.