

# How the Green Belt Was Saved with Walks, Booths and Pumpkins

by Susan Barnett and Kristin Fletcher

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the Greenbelt Pumpkin Walk. Ever wonder how the tradition got started? Believe it or not, it began in 1987 when the last of Greenbelt's woods were threatened with development.

In 1987, many Greenbelters who were prone to roaming the last of the original "Green Belt" had no idea that their beloved woods didn't actually belong to the town of Greenbelt. These woods (officially known as Parcel 1 and Parcel 2) had been sold to developers in 1954 by the Greenbelt Veterans Housing Corporation (which in 1957 came Greenbelt Homes, Inc.). In fact, over time, all of the original 800 acres of the green belt had been sold. Although the city subsequently purchased some of this land, much had been developed. But not Parcels 1 and 2.

In the 1960s, there was a plan for Parcel 1 and 2. The Prince George's County Board of Education had purchased parts of both Parcel 1 and 2 – a total of 72 acres – to build a three-school complex. Concerned citizens joined together to form SOCC (Save Our Community Committee) and defeated this effort. Eventually the Board of Education selected another site for Eleanor Roosevelt High School and the 72 acres was acquired by the city. The city also proposed another 38 acres of Parcels 1 and 2 to purchase a narrow green belt and later purchased the remainder of Parcel 2. The woods of Parcels 1 and 2 were left intact and free to grow for more than 20 years.

## Citizen Action Tours

On November 19, 1987, the developers who owned the remaining 103 acres of Parcel 1 presented council with their plans to develop it into town homes and detached homes with roads and infrastructure. When the front-page story "Townhouses, Detached Homes Proposed for Undeveloped Parcel 1 in North End" ran in the November 26 News Review, many citizens

were in shock. Leonie Penney wasted no time offering her home as a place for woods wanderers to join her in discussing how to save the much loved green belt or The Great North Woods as they were often called.

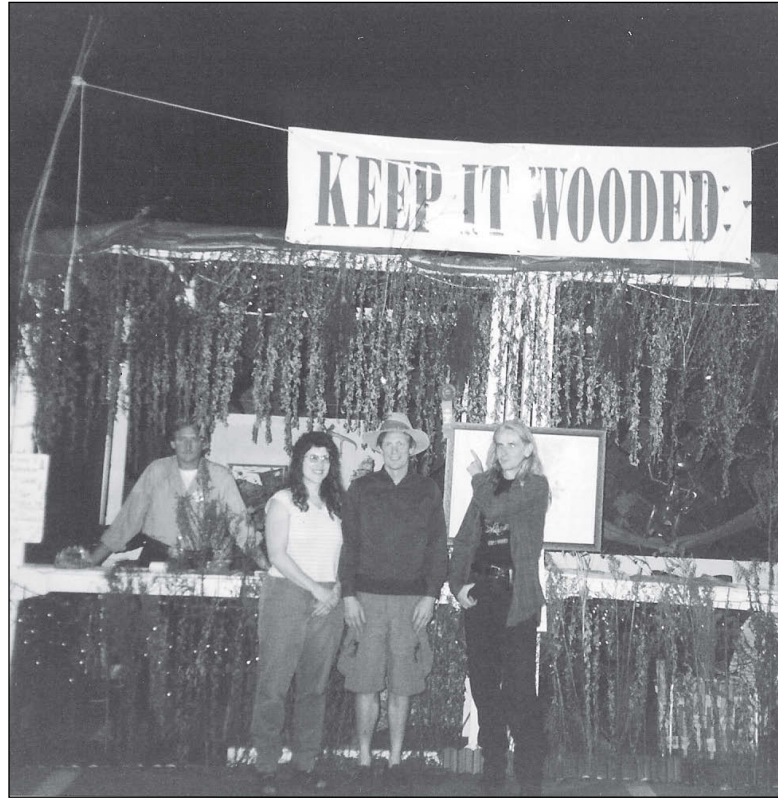
Many folks came to the meeting and signed up for what they thought they could do best. That night was the beginning of what emerged as the Committee to Save the Green Belt, the group that led the community on the path to saving the woods. Four citizens at the meeting found common ground in creating the Activities Committee: Yoni Siegel, Paul Downs, Bill Rich and Rodney Roberts. They immediately agreed that it was critically important to lead the townspeople on tours of the Green Belt.

The following week's News Review ran six letters to the editor in support of saving the Green Belt. The letters and authors were: "Need Wild Land" by Tina Rhea; "Save the Green Belt" by Leonie Penney; "Phantom Green Belt" by B. Sue Benson; "Last Call" by Tom X. White, Jr.; "Last Call for Deer" by Matt Durintine; and "Last Call for a Hike" by Paul Downs. The last letter announced a tour of "100 beautiful acres . . . before the destruction takes place . . . meet at 1 p.m. on Saturday at the end of Northway extended . . . there'll be free sandwiches and drinks."

This last letter marked the beginning of an ongoing effort. For the next several years the Committee to Save the Green Belt hosted weekly Tours of the Green Belt. Nearly every Saturday they led hikes and provided free sandwiches and drinks. They brought hundreds of townspeople into the woods so they could better understand the natural beauty of the forest that would be lost.

## Labor Day Booths

In 1988, the Activities Committee participated in the Labor Day Festival with a booth that won second prize. Photos of that year show a young Doug Love



The Core Four at their Labor Day Booth – Rodney Roberts, Yoni Siegel, Paul Downs and Bill Rich.

helping in the booth. In 1989, with more elaborate plans to sell pictures of the woods, the committee worked hard for weeks in advance on their booth. Rodney Roberts rode in helicopters and planes to take aerial photos of the woods. Other photos were taken by Bill Rich and Greg Fisanich. Frames were constructed out of wood from the GHI scrap yard. An elaborate booth was built for their well known sign, "Save the Green Belt," which eventually was changed to "Keep it Wooded." That year, the booth won first prize.

Every year thereafter for 15 years, the Committee to Save the Green Belt had a Labor Day booth. Over the years they had various themes and they continued to win prizes. Many folks helped them in the booth, including Bob and Jean Rashkin, Terri Rutledge and Craig Tooley, Val Elliott, Dorian Winterfeld, Amethyst Dwyer and others.

## Pumpkin Walks

Also in 1988 Activities Committee member Paul Downs suggested a Halloween Tour of the woods. A small notice placed in the News Review encouraged the town to join them on October 21 and 22: "The fun starts with a short walk down the trails. There will be lots of pumpkins along the way and a 20-foot ghost that flies. There will be candy and hot cocoa with marshmallows."

Using the money raised at the Labor Day Booth to buy pumpkins, the committee carved as many as they could. The pumpkins glowed in the night woods – and the townsfolk loved it! While the carving has taken place in different locations – at Roosevelt Center, inside or outside of the New Deal Café or on Northway – the tradition has endured for 25 years. Before his death, Doug Love would regale the visitors with some scary and not so scary stories on the walk. The Phantom and Goatman were regular apparitions. Many others joined it to help make it a great success year after year.

## Community Effort

There was always the core group of four Greenbelters – Paul Downs, Bill Rich, Rodney Roberts and Yoni Siegel, who, driven by their passion for the woods, persisted from Labor Day to Labor Day and Halloween to

## Pumpkin Walk This Saturday

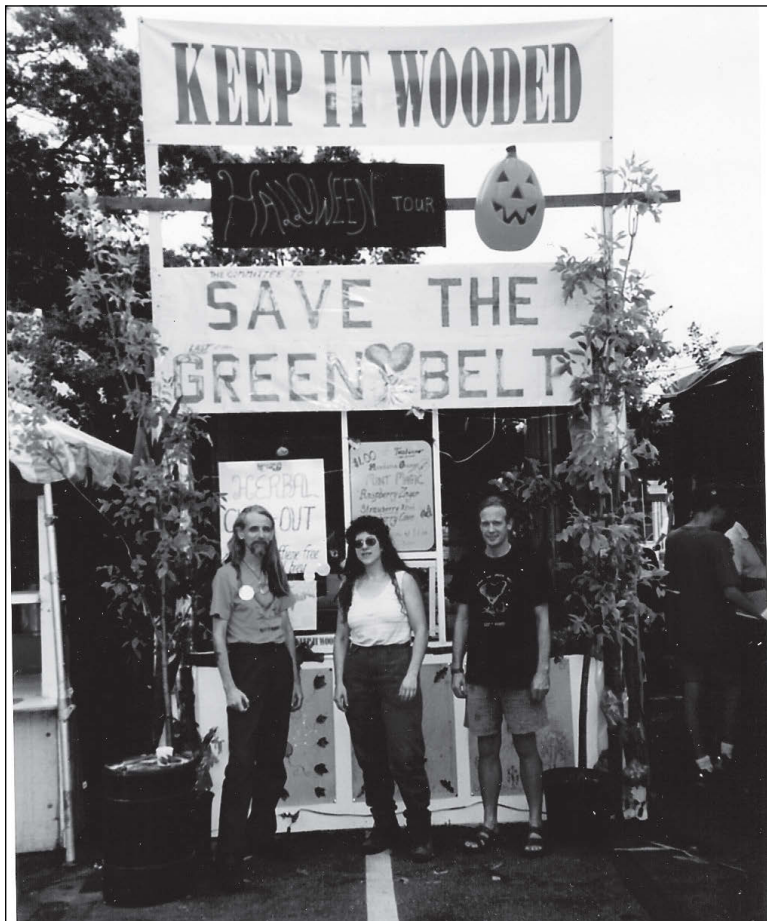
This year marks 25 years of the Greenbelt Annual Pumpkin Walk and the 10th Anniversary of the Greenbelt Forest Preserve. The Pumpkin Walk will be held on Saturday, October 19. Meet on Northway extended. Carving begins at 10 a.m. and goes until 5 p.m.

Bring a pumpkin or carve a pumpkin provided. The walk begins at dark and goes until 9 p.m. Zombie Dash is set for 11 a.m. at Northway Fields. Zombies should arrive at 10:30 a.m. dressed and ready; runners arrive at 10:50 a.m.

For more information call Allison Smith Bolten at 301-910-1669.

being willing to attend meetings, volunteer for events and embrace Greenbelt's namesake. The Committee to Save the Green Belt offered leadership, innovative ideas and a strong core of long-term volunteers. Council listened to residents and responded by acquiring the remaining 103 acres with the help of the federal government and aid of the city's senators and congressman and eventually voting to create the Greenbelt Forest Preserve.

Because of the ability of the community to come together, new generations will be able to enjoy a very special natural wild world right in their own backyard, 225 acres of rare urban wilderness, sheltered and safe from the march of mankind. And the trees will stand. And the wildlife will thrive. And we thank those who acted and spoke for the Green Belt.



Keep it Wooded booth another year – Bill Rich, Yoni Siegel and Paul Downs.



The Labor Day Booth advertises The Halloween Tour. Bill Rich holds a "Keep it Wooded" bumper sticker. This booth took the blue ribbon.



Pumpkins ready for placing along the trail in the woods. 1991.