

MONTOUR TRAIL-LETTER

The Montour Trail Council: Celebrating 35 years of trail building

January-February 2024, Vol. 36, No. 1

Q&A: Nick Koman

The Montour Trail Council completed one of its biggest projects with the recent rehab of the eastern half of the Greer Tunnel. A trail volunteer, Nick Koman, stepped in as project manager and helped shepherd the \$1.2 million project. He's a member of the MTC's Engineering & Construction committee and took charge after the original project manager was unable to continue. Here, Koman, 33, discussed the ambitious project that's expected to conclude this spring.

What kind of experience did you bring to this project?

I have almost nine years of design experience working as a professional engineer for JMT, a full-service engineering firm. We work on a variety of projects, our main clients are PennDOT and the PA Turnpike.

Describe the condition of the Greer Tunnel before this project.

It was really in poor condition. Over time, a longitudinal crack had formed along the tunnel ceiling extending approximately 100' into the tunnel. A large hole had also formed that continued to drop debris and posed a safety concern. To help, scaffolding was installed to catch falling debris until a more permanent fix could be implemented. Something needed to be done.

What was the biggest challenge of this rehab project?

There were several challenges, but one of the biggest was the cost. The cost of materials and labor have really gone up and this leads to unpredictable bidding costs. Fortunately, the trail was able to lower the cost through a generous grant from the Redevelopment Authority of Washington County, donations from trail users and the help from trail volunteers.

What were the other primary challenges?

They included the unforeseen work to stabilize the eastern portal, the work to ensure we are in compliance with funders' guidelines and procedures, and coordinating news and information to our trail users.



Nick Koman brought his expertise to the Greer rehab. (photo: Julian Wolfe)

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We Remember



Family photo, 2009

John and Berenice Hooton, who donated so much of their time in building the Montour Trail, passed away late last year. John, 94, and Berenice, 89, who were married for 65 years, moved from the South Hills to Port Charlotte, FL, in 2019. Through their trail-side gardening and many other endeavors, John and Berenice were active members of the trail's Cecil Friends Group. John played a lead role in fund development and served numerous terms as a member of the MTC's Board of Directors. For the grand celebration of the 20th anniversary of the trail in 2009, the event's program contained a detailed article by John, "The Montour Trail at 20: How Did We Get Here?," that acknowledged its many volunteers, benefactors and partners.

To honor and celebrate John and Berenice's lives, a memorial service is scheduled to be held on June 15, 2024, on the trail. **For details or to extend your condolences, please contact:** jameshooton@gmail.com

A remembrance of John and Berenice Hooton By Stan Sattinger, the first president of the Montour Trail Council

John and Berenice were among my closest friends in the Montour Trail clan, and they loved the Trail. Their dedication was evidenced by the beautiful gardens that they created along the Trail in Cecil Township and maintained for years on their own initiative. John and Berenice were my co-chairs for the gala Montour Trail 20th Anniversary Celebration, held at the Pittsburgh Airport Marriott in 2009. John and Berenice will be missed by many within and outside the MTC.



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Tour the Montour leadership opportunity. One or two volunteers needed for 2025 to lead our signature fundraising bicycle ride, the Tour the Montour. This event, in its 22nd year, has established teams of volunteers who manage aspects of the event, with strong sponsors and eager rider participants. In 2024, future leader(s) have the opportunity to shadow the current leadership team, which will provide support in 2025. A two-year commitment is desired. No prior event planning experience needed. Please contact Phillip Torrez for more info: thetour@montourtrail.org

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Prez Sez: Forward to All

By Ned Williams

Warmest post-holiday greetings. Despite Winter being upon us, it does have its charms. It's good to have the opportunity to remember the joys of going out and taking a walk on a snowy, crunchy cold winter day. Taking in the rhythm of the seasons is one of the most revitalizing elements of living in these latitudes. Soon enough, all that cold stillness and silence will melt into the noisy warm rush of Spring. Well, I may be getting a bit ahead of the calendar, but at least the days ARE now getting longer.

Observing the faces of Janus, allow me to look back a bit before we move forward. By almost any measure, 2023 was a remarkable year for the Montour Trail. We got another year further out from the pandemic, and yet trail use has remained strong. Most areas continued to see lots of cyclists, walkers, runners, and dog walkers. Each of the Friends Groups did a particularly great job this year of keeping the trail well groomed and looking nice, as well as talking with trail people. And our trail maintenance crew outdid itself, resurfacing a record 10 miles with beautiful smooth limestone.

A new project management team completed a complex, large-scale construction project. A new event leadership group managed the best Tour the Montour to date. Both generated a great amount of good press and wide media/social coverage that portrayed the trail very well, keeping us in a positive light and in the public's top of mind for much of the year. Other less visible construction projects progressed, despite administrative headwinds.

All of Montour's functions and committees worked hard and accomplished a lot this year. This is not easy work, often underappreciated, but vital to keeping the enterprise running. The committees managed to achieve goals of smoother operation despite an increase in their scope of activities, especially Finance, IT/GIS and Real Estate. Dynamic interaction between committees and with the board yielded much tighter coordination.

What, then, can you expect in 2024? The Friends Groups have all laid out their plans and goals for the year, as have the standing committees. They'll be striving to clean up unfinished items and set themselves to work towards new goals. The trail maintenance crew has several projects and more resurfacing on tap. Thanks in part to generous donations and strong membership, Montour has the best equipment fleet ever, plus a broad range of hand and power tools, not only within the maintenance crew, but spread throughout the Friends groups. Perhaps the best thing we can do to honor a volunteer, for the giving of their time, is to supply him or her with a good tool, so they can accomplish as much as they would like. And go home feeling good about it.

While we won't get the trail done (as of January, that's still three years away), progress is planned. The Greer west portal should be done mid-spring or so, finally clearing the way for a proper ribbon-cutting celebration of the entire Greer project. And new trail construction from Wood Street to Stewart Road, in South Park Township, should occur later in the year. Another ribbon cutting! A particularly long awaited one, at that. Tangible progress on other trail construction projects is in the works, stay tuned.

You'll be able to depend on this fine newsletter, now firmly in new and capable hands, to bring you the stories and track the pulse of the Montour. Also, our website and social media folks are constantly improving the showcasing of the trail. Plans are being made to ramp up our interaction with existing and potential new donors and with members. We hope to keep finances strong and growing, so that with a robust cadre of volunteers we can continue to deliver and enhance the premier trail that this region has come to expect.

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Trail Friends' Meetings and Work Parties

MTC Board Meeting:

Every third Monday of the month at 6:00 p.m. at 2589 Boyce Plaza Road, Suite 4, Upper St. Clair. Turn at the traffic signal on Boyce Road between the railroad and the creek. Call the Montour Trail Office for more information or to get on the agenda.

Airport Area Friends (MP 0 to MP 12.6 and the 6.3 mile Airport Connector)

Friends of the Trail meeting, every second Wednesday of the month at 7:00 p.m. at the MTC Western Corridor Garage, 450 Cliff Mine Road, North Fayette Township, PA 15108. New volunteers are always welcome. For more information call Mark Modispacher at 412-266-1544. Work parties are scheduled as needed. For more information call 412-262-3748.

Fort Cherry Friends (MM 12.6 to 20.7)

Friends of the Trail meeting, every second Wednesday of the month at 6:30 p.m. at the McDonald Trail Station, 160 S. McDonald St., McDonald, PA 15057 (adjacent to the Panhandle Trail). Work parties are scheduled as needed. For more information, please contact Tim Thomassy at (724) 926-4617.

Cecil Friends (MM 22.0 to 28.5)

Friends of the Trail meeting, every fourth Wednesday of the month at 6:30 p.m. at the Kurnick Access area along the trail off Cecil Henderson Road. Work parties are scheduled as needed. For more information, contact Bob Mihalco at 786-910-5575 or ramihalco@icloud.com.

The Montour Railroad Historical Society:

For more information, email mrhs@montourrr.com

Peters Township Friends: (MM 28.5 to 30.4, Library Jct to near MM 35 and part of the Bethel Branch)

Friends of the Trail meeting, the first non-holiday Monday of each month at 7:00 p.m. at various locations depending on weather and time of year. Work parties on the first Friday and third Saturday of every month at 8:30 a.m. For more information on meetings or work parties please email us at petersfriends@montourtrail.org.

Bethel Park Friends (The 2.75 mile Bethel Branch and a short piece of main line trail around MM 35).

Friends of the Trail meeting, every first Tuesday of the month at 7:30 p.m. in the Bethel Park Municipal Building Caucus Room behind the Council Chambers. Anyone interested in the Bethel Park Trail segments is encouraged to come. Work parties, every second and fourth Saturday of the month at 8:30 a.m. For more information, please call Bill Capp at (412) 833-5928.

South Hills Friends (MM 35.4 to 46.6)

Friends of the Trail Meeting, every second Tuesday of the month at 6:30 p.m. at South Park Township Community Room or the Township Library located in the Township Building at 2675 Brownsville Road, South Park, 15129. Work parties on the second Saturday of the month. For more information, contact David Oyler at 412-831-9288, davidoyler1950@gmail.com or Paul McKeown at 412-835-6692, mckeownp@comcast.net.

Westland Friends (MM 21.0 to 21.9, and Westland Branch)

Friends of the Trail meeting, every first Wednesday of the month. For more information, contact Deb Thompson at intrepidscout@theneonweb.com

Cecil Friends Secure Storage Container

The Cecil Friends Group now has a shipping container for its trail equipment, located adjacent to the Kurnick garage (at about mile 26 of the trail). The 40-foot-long container, with access from two doors at either end, was bought in Ohio, and had been used only once before it was brought to its new home. "It's a good place to keep our stuff organized," says Bob Mihalco, president of the Cecil Friends. The group hired an electrician to install outlets inside the container to charge batteries and such. In acquiring and organizing the container with shelving and wall mounts, the Cecil volunteers took inspiration from Dave Hajnik of the Westland Friends who had secured a shipping container at the nearby Galati trailhead in 2017. Previously, Cecil Friends had stored its mowers, power and hand tools, and other equipment in the Kurnick garage. Much of the equipment and tools has been donated to the Cecil Friends by neighbors and trail supporters, Mihalco says.



Cecil Friends outside container: (L to R) John Wright, Donna Click, Dennis Sims, Bob Mihalco, Chuck Wolf (photo: Phillip Torrez)

Continued from page 2 - Forward to All

MTC is in the final year of its current strategic plan, so a new one will be drawn up, probably in a daylong session in November. It will yield the fifth such plan, designed to look ahead three years and give shape to agreed-upon goals and objectives across a variety of organizational, managerial and operational areas. These plans have kept us on track, but it's become clear that they would be more effective if formed in the light of an established long-term vision. Accordingly, this time an effort will be made to pull together such a vision before the planning session. (Think: What do we want the trail to look like in, say, 30 years? What do we have to do to get it there?)

I've saved the best 2024 news for last: MTC will be enjoying its first new leadership team in a long while. In addition to new board members, Bill Orr and Tina Zottola, Montour is now being led by President Julian Wolfe, Vice President John Dorman, Treasurer Bill Orr, and Secretary Fran Hensler. Congratulations to all, and good for the trail community! And much thanks to Nominating chair Dave Borrebach for deftly orchestrating all this.

It has been an honor to have had the opportunity to serve as your president for the past year. Certainly some difficulties arose, but I am proud of the way that everybody worked together to forge effective solutions. You can be assured that Montour leadership will continue to work hard and smart for the long-term vitality and growth of the trail. In terms of the message actioning, then, it continues to be "Forward to All."

Again, thanks to all of you, and may you be well. Have a great new year in 2024.

Westland Friends Turns Five

By Deb Thompson, Westland Friends president



In 2009, the Montour Trail Council was approached by MarkWest Energy with an interesting proposition. It needed rail access to its facility near Houston, PA, and the trail had an unused spur in exactly the right spot. MarkWest agreed to lease the property, building a rail line for its use and four miles of trail for us. A win-win for the MTC and MarkWest! The agreement was signed in late 2010, and the new Westland Branch of the Montour Trail was opened in 2012.

One thing was missing, though. The Westland Branch lacked the tender loving care of a MTC Friends Group, so valuable to the upkeep of other sections of the trail. Without anyone to look after it, the new branch began to decay like Miss Havisham's wedding cake. Drainage grates clogged with sediment, and the ensuing backup of water cut nasty ruts. These were further exacerbated by energetic animals digging burrows under the fencing. Vegetation overgrowth had encroached until the only passage was a handlebar's width of open trail in some places.

Despite the neglect, this was still Dave Hajnik's favorite section of trail. The wide-open vistas of farmland made for a pretty and relaxing section with a character different from most of the rest of the trail. At that time, Dave was recently retired and looking for an activity to undertake as he made the transition from his desk job to a greater focus on the outdoors.

In 2018, Dave approached MTC President Ned Williams to discuss starting a new Friends Group. In October 2018, a hearty group of three volunteers began the daunting task of whipping the Westland Branch into shape. Work began with filling ruts and clearing the trail-wide nemesis, Japanese knotweed. They secured a grant from the MTC board to purchase a shipping container to use as a storage shed, a reliable John Deere mower and necessary hand tools. They were the first Friends Group to install a solar panel to provide a trickle charger for the mower.

During initial days of work on the branch, trail users were few and far between. Then in February 2019, the Friends installed a sign at Gilmore Junction, pointing the way to the Westland Branch (photo above). As it turned out, few trail users even knew that the Westland Branch existed. With the signage and cleared brush, users began to show up.

As time went on, trail conditions continued to be improved. A dumpster was secured, complements of Waste Management. A year-round portajohn was secured for the Westland trailhead. It was discovered that drainage socks had been left in all drainage grates, and this was responsible for the clogging, so all of the socks were removed. A steep slope near the railyard was paved to control washouts. Brush clearing, rut repair, sign installation, and drainage improvements continued.

The latest test of Westland Branch came in this year's Gateway Engineers Tour the Montour, when the branch was pressed into service to compensate for the mileage lost with the temporary closure of Greer Tunnel. A healthy number of metric-century cyclists enjoyed a clear, smooth, safe Westland Branch thanks to the Westland Friends. With this, we celebrate five years of the Westland Friends Group.

We could use more members! If you'd like to join us, please drop an email to: intrepidscout@theneonweb.com



Clearing of right of way, looking toward Westland from the Johnson Road crossing. (photo: John Breitigan, Nov. 2011)



Hauling ballast. The Westland Branch trail is to the right of the track. Wooden stakes mark fence posts to separate the track from the trail. (photo: John Breitigan, July 2012)

Fun Fact

At its height in the 1930s, the Montour Railroad served 27 mines, transporting nearly seven million tons of coal annually in Allegheny and Washington counties.



Growing Partnership with Key Trail Neighbor

Words & photos by Julian Wolfe



Jocelyn Ebert of Imperial Land (center) presents a donation to Montour Trail Council chief of maintenance Bill Capp. Also pictured, (left to right) Airport Friends volunteer Mark Modispacher, MTC President Ned Williams, and senior maintenance officials Bob Sutton, Dave Jackel and Dave Mikula.

On the cool Monday morning of Nov. 20, 2023, Montour Trail Council volunteers and a senior representative of the Imperial Land Corp. dedicated a new trail gate off Boggs Road in Findlay Township. The new gate will prevent unauthorized vehicles from accessing the trail, while also allowing Imperial Land motor traffic to cross the trail to access their large property that is adjacent to the trail near the Boggs trailhead. Jocelyn Ebert, Imperial Land director for development and government relations, presented a generous donation to the Trail Council at the ceremony. Ms. Ebert admired the sturdy new gate that the Montour Trail maintenance crew built and installed at the access point, and highlighted the longtime strong relationship and continuing cooperation between Imperial Land and the Trail Council. She also praised the diligent work of Montour's maintenance crew, led by veteran crew chief William Capp, to maintain more than 40 miles of trail across Allegheny and Washington counties.



Maintenance chief Capp and crew members installing the new gate near Boggs Road.

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Why was galvanized steel lining used in the project?

The lining system was designed and fabricated by Camber Corp. that specializes in similar lining systems used in the mining industry. Several different types of steel could have been used for the finish face, but galvanized was chosen for its rust resistant properties. An added benefit is its reflective properties that help reflect more light into the tunnel.



Top of the Greers' Eastern portal, showing the original date of construction and the date of the rehab. The MTC logo is between the dates. (photo: Nick Koman)

Help us pay for the Greer rehab.
Every little bit will help.
Please go to: montourtrail.org

Seems like the project moved quickly.

For a project of this size, three months is a great turnaround. We had the added benefit of fully closing the trail near the tunnel and providing plenty of space for the contractor to stage equipment. The contractor was able to move quicker and be more efficient with the time.

What's ahead for this project?

In the next phase, we'll be installing anchors to stabilize the western portal, similar to what was done on the east portal. Several holes will be drilled through the portal and into the competent rock behind. Threaded rods will be grouted into the holes and steel plates will be fastened against the outside of the portal.

How long will this next phase take, and will the Greer be closed?

Considering the timeline from the work already performed, it is estimated to be 30 days. The trail will be closed during construction, but we are hoping to complete this in the early spring to have the tunnel open for the summer.

Reaction from trail users since the eastern portal phase was completed?

When we reopened the trail, several cyclists were already lining up to ride through. Trail users have shown a tremendous amount of gratitude and appreciation for the work.

Montour Railroad History

Picking Coal

by Bryan Seip, Montour Railroad Historical Society



Coal picking was common along the tracks.

A century ago, most homes in our area were heated by coal. In the 1960s, natural gas became the preferred home-heating fuel and coal furnaces started to fade away.

Coal furnaces need a ready supply of coal. Many houses had a coal cellar or a shed in the backyard to store coal. The coal might be supplied by a local dealer, who would deliver a truckload to houses. But families could save money with any free coal that could be added to their storage pile. The smell of coal smoke from the communities along the Montour was always present during cold weather.

For those who lived in the coal patch communities or more rural villages, coal would be picked off the ground. One chore for kids in those communities was to pick coal into a burlap bag or a pail and carry it home. An old mining engineer told of days during the Depression when his parents would send him out walking the tracks to retrieve coal that had fallen off railcars to heat their home. Pickers knew that locations where trains were switched or regularly stopped and started would have coal knocked off overloaded hopper cars.

At coal mines, the waste pile or slate dump also contained some good coal. Many mining companies had strict rules about picking coal. At National #3 Mine in Muse, lorry cars carried waste rock out of the mine and dumped it on the surrounding hillsides. For safety reasons, the coal company did not allow kids on the slate dump while machinery was in use. At Muse, the dumping stopped at the end of the day shift at 3 p.m. The mine whistle would blow, signaling the end of the shift and kids could then go onto the dump to pick chunks of coal that came out with the slate and rock.

Old stories tell of residents climbing onto parked hoppers and throwing coal down to cohorts on the ground. This was common in Cecil Township when the locomotives would cut off from a loaded

train to go to Muse or Westland, leaving their cars on the main track. Cars set off temporarily at Cowden or Peacock sidings would often be picked by the locals.

An ex-Montour Railroad employee recalled riding trains as they labored slowly up grade through Hendersonville, looking back from the engines and seeing men tossing large chunks of coal from the hoppers. The Montour crews said when this happened, especially during wintertime, no one would say or do anything about it.

Crews also remember seeing the locals walking the tracks with burlap bags picking up the chunks that fell from the hoppers, especially between #4 Mine up through Hendersonville. The first few miles coming out of a mine was where the rocking motion of overloaded hoppers would most likely spill some coal.

Another source of free coal was the scene of a derailment, where loaded coal hoppers would spill part of their load or overturn after derailling. If a derailment involved only a car or two, or a partially spilled load, the coal company often did not bother to clean it up, making it "open season" for local folks to gather the coal.

An incident at the bridge over Muse-Bishop Road caused a carload of coal to spill onto the bank of the railroad. Some enterprising locals built a wooden chute leading to the roadway below to load the coal into their vehicles.

An ex-resident of Imperial told this story: "Near the end of Montour operations, in many places the track and ties were in very bad shape. This was definitely true of the curve just outside of the Jeffrey Town tunnel near Enlow. In the 70s, I saw numerous derailments there with hoppers lying on their sides and coal was everywhere. I remember seeing entire families filling anything they could carry with coal to take home for heating."

Picking went on year-round, as coal recovered during the summer months was stored for use during the next winter. Picking coal was a way for families to save some of their hard-earned wages.



*A derailment at Galati Road spilled coal onto the roadway.
(photo: Gene P. Schaeffer)*

*You can contact the Montour Railroad Historical Society through Facebook by searching for **the Montour Railroad Historical Society**. There are currently 425 members from across the country. There you'll find a wealth of information about the Montour Railroad and you can pose questions of its membership. You can also check at montourrr.com*

I want to support the Montour Trail Council



Become a member now

Complete this form, scan the QR code, or go to mountourtrail.org/support-us/



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Annual Membership Level

- ☐ Trail Blazer..... \$1,000+
- ☐ Leader's Circle.....\$500
- ☐ Benefactor.....\$250
- ☐ Sustaining.....\$100
- ☐ Supporting.....\$50
- ☐ Family\$35
- ☐ Individual.....\$25
- ☐ Student/Senior.....\$15

Contribution enclosed: \$ _____

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Giving to the Trail: Qualified Charitable Distributions (QCDs)

Have you considered donating to the Montour Trail? By using your IRA, you are able to provide a benefit to the trail and receive a tax savings at the same time. You can do this in a few ways. If you are over 70.5 after 2019, you can donate directly from your IRA to a qualified charity even if you have not reached your Required Minimum Distribution (RMD) age. After a certain age, taxpayers must take distributions from his or her IRA, which is called the Required Minimum Distribution. It is taxable as annual income. For some, this can be a tax burden. However, it can be donated to a charity and, if done correctly, can be subtracted from the total income so that the tax category is lowered. To do this correctly, the money must go directly from the IRA to the trail. One cannot write a check from a personal account (the donor cannot have a distribution made to them and then use those funds to make a donation to the charity). The exception to this is - if an IRA has a check option, the owner can write a check on this account. The actual money donated is not tax deductible as it is not included in the donor's gross income, but the total amount of income is reduced by that amount and, therefore, is a tax benefit. You can add the trail as a contingent beneficiary through a beneficiary designation form. This will not provide a current tax savings, but will reduce your taxable estate in a future year. Please consult your investment and tax advisor to determine if this is a good option for you. The Montour Trail is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization and qualified for such a donation.

--by Patricia Friedsam

We Welcome Our New Trail Members

The Montour Trail Council welcomes these new members and thanks them for their support. We would also like to thank all our members who have recently renewed their annual membership. Please note that foundations and other grant-making agencies often look at a strong membership as a criteria in their consideration of our funding requests. Not all new members have been entered as of our publication deadline and will be listed in the next edition of the Trail-Letter.

New Members

James Benanti
James Bielenberg
Charles Blenko
Frank Burke
Anna Carlile
Dan and Lisa Connell
Thomas Daily
Robert Fargo
Michael Gin
Christine Gruener
Jeffrey Guyot
Richard Hilberer
Jeff Johnston
Raymond Kikel
Louis M. Komer
David Lynn
Nathanael McDonough
Owen D. McElligott
Judy Moser
Mike and Mary Nesbit
Mark Palastro
Dan Patton
Thomas Rekowski
Mary Shaw
Daniel Simons
Donna Staub
David Stoebe
Lon Susack
Brian Temple

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John Trnosky
Mike Weiner
Paul Wietecha
Diane Wojcik
Kenneth Wolfe
Travis Woodburn

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Stephen Bowles
Michael Brocks
Greg and Juliann Brzozowski
James Collopy
Thomas Daily
Jeffrey Devlin
Tom and Sara Dougherty
John Drescher
Robert L. Hickey
Kent James
Murray Johnson
John and Eileen Kennon
Peter Kozlowski
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Denny Long
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Carroll and Bob McGowan
Kenneth Miller

Judy Moser
Steven Nance
Art Peternel
Zenaida Rosado
Tom Shields
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Phillip and Annemarie Torrez
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Mike Weiner
Nicholas Weirick
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William Kutzer
Shawn McClintock
Steve and Shelley Ross
Mary Shaw and Roy Weil
Paul Wietecha

IN MEMORY

John and Berenice Hooton
James Hooton
Lauren Ross
Pat Walleit

Robert D. Martin
Sarah Ali

IN HONOR
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Bruce O'Neill



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