



Branch Newsletter

April, 2026

Membership meeting 7 p.m. Thursday, April 23, Ricketts Center

Our speaker will be Bob Brown, who will talk about the history of Chicken Hill, a community in Pottstown that recently received new notoriety when it was featured in a book, "The Heaven and Earth Grocery Store," written by James McBride. But that was a novel, and Brown will tell us the truth about this extraordinary working-class neighborhood, a mostly tight-knit community that was home mainly to Black people and Hungarian and Lithuanian Jews.

The Zoom link is <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84995648174?>

[wd=QlAyaHZkWIJXZWk1T3FWcHNFVnJOQT09](https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84995648174?wd=QlAyaHZkWIJXZWk1T3FWcHNFVnJOQT09) Meeting ID:849 9564 8174 Passcode: 937480

Shower program at Ricketts Center that benefits homeless may be shut down.

NAACP says it is vital and compassionate and should be continued

Five and a half years ago, Deborah McKim embarked on a mission – a calling, you might say – to provide showers for people who are homeless.

She found a partner in the Ricketts Center, where the staff prides itself on service to the community.

Eventually, the Rev. Dennis Coleman, deacon of Christ Episcopal Church, donated a clothes washer and dryer. Two days a week, for

two hours each, McKim hosts the homeless. Branch members Annette Kobb and Joanne Washington have pitched in.

But recently, Boyertown Multi-Service, Inc., which runs the Center, abruptly announced that the shower program would end.

This move has shocked and dismayed the community, and the NAACP stepped up to see what could be done. On April 8, mem-

bers of the Executive Committee met with Bob Varga, executive director of BMS, and Robin Kertis, president of the board.

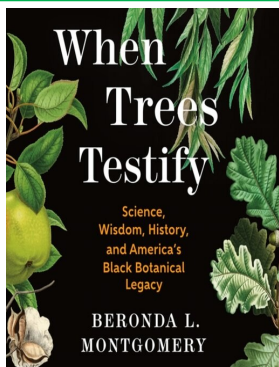
Alas, the meeting soon turned contentious. Voices were raised. One member stormed out. But we kept talking. In the end, Varga and Kertis seemed willing to bend in some way. We will know more after their board meets to discuss it.

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Coffee with the Cops at Ricketts Center

The branch on March 28 brought children’s books, members and a speaker -- President Johnny Corson -- to the Coffee With the Cops event, sponsored by Fresh Start Ministries, at the Ricketts Center. At the NAACP Road to Reading table are (from left) Pottstown officers John Lancaster and Colby Goldsmith, Fresh Start pastor Terrence Paul, President Corson, officer Ryan Stead, Sgts. Steve Hatfield and Mike Breslin, and officer Mike Mitchell. With RTR co-manager Sandy Bauers is Sharon Holloway (right) who heads our partner group, Mother Goose Read To Me, and who spoke about the importance of reading to very young children. Also, President Corson addresses the group about NAACP initiatives.



NAACP book club’s May title explores Black botanical legacy

Pecan trees. Sycamore trees. Willow bark. All have meaning and importance in Black history. Plant biologist Beronda L. Montgomery explores how seven trees are intertwined with Black history and culture in *When Trees Testify: Science, Wisdom, History and America’s Black Botanical Legacy*. We’ll meet to discuss it on Monday, May 11, at 6 p.m. at the Pottstown library. As usual, the library is holding copies for us. Just ask at the desk.

All are welcome!

Road to Reading continues

The branch's Road to Reading program, which gives books to children ages birth to 8 years in Pottstown, has officially passed a benchmark — 30,000 books. We are extremely grateful to the anonymous donor who funds the program. Photos here are from the Easter egg hunt at Riverfront Park.

This spring, every elementary school student in Pottstown — roughly 1,200 kids — will receive a book for the Spring Reading Picnic.



NAACP youth group celebrates Women's History Month

An impressive crew of area women spoke to the NAACP youth group during Women's History Month. The theme of the event was "And Still, She Persisted." Pictured (from left) are Nicole Rouse, an author; Regina Astheimer, youth group advisor and founder of Women on the Move; Dolores Winston, author and founder of "Dolly Dishes It Out;" Letitia Santiago-Carter, an attorney; Rochelle Blackwood, a leader at Pine Forge Academy, and Danielle McCoy, the first female high school principal in the Pottstown School District. Also speaking were Ervina White Beauford, Pottstown's first female and first Black funeral director, and Lidia Di Fiore, communications director for State Sen. Tracy Pennycuik (R-24).

Shower program at Ricketts, Center, Continued from Page One

The root of the difference: BMS wants to make the Ricketts Center more attractive to the community at large. Vargas said, he wanted to make it “a viable place where people want to go.”

What, it isn't?

He said having the homeless there would be a detriment. He even contended that some seniors who wanted to attend the new pickleball program were “terrified” of the homeless. (Note: Pickleball is on Tuesday and Thursday. The showers are on Monday and Wednesday.)

But the NAACP feels that the Ricketts Center is – and always has been – more than just a place to play basketball and lift weights. It is a place to lift the community.

Food is distributed from the Ricketts. It has hosted blood drives and Covid vaccination events. People vote there. And so much more. Compassion for all is part of the objective.

Branch President Johnny Corson said the center is the heart and soul of the community.

“You don't know the history of that center,” he told Varga and Kertis. “You're disrespecting our community. It is offensive.”

He said BMS was also violating its own mission statement, posted on its website, which “is to provide resources and services to meet unfulfilled human and community needs.”

The BMS contract with the borough, authorizing it to run the cen-



ter, states that the borough's goal for the center “is to assist youth and families in improving the quality of life by providing opportunities that address health, education, recreation, spiritual and the social needs of Pottstown residents.”

Varga contended that a shower program for the homeless did not fit with this goal. Corson contended it did.

Things will become more complicated this summer, when a kids' camp begins. Varga wants to ensure that no adults – not just the homeless – are allowed near the children.

The NAACP contends that the shower hours can be adjusted to accomplish that.

Meanwhile, the borough, which is responsible for the maintenance of the building, has been awarded a \$350,000 grant for repairs and other improvements.

Varga said the decision to end the shower program was his alone, but he also said that after a recent tour of the building with Borough Parks and Rec manager Michael Leonard, Leonard “emailed me a few days later. He was disgusted at the way it looked.”

Agreed. The building has not received the attention it needs. Why?

At the end of the meeting, Varga agreed to allow the showers to continue until the BMS board discusses it and reaches a decision.

Deborah McKim, who runs the program on a volunteer basis – “The Lord pays me,” she said -- was relieved.

“This program is helpful,” she said. “It gives people dignity. They are

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President Johnny Corson

“This program is helpful. It gives people dignity. They are so grateful.”

Deborah McKim