



by **JENIFER JONSON**

photographs by **GUS CANTAVERO** and **KIKI KOROSHETZ**



# Waking Up Darien

Lessons in invigorating a quaint downtown

Sitting in the artisan coffee bar Espresso Neat, on Grove Street in Darien, is a bit of a full-circle experience for longtime town resident Penny Glassmeyer.

Nearly twenty years ago, she began acquiring the four properties that form the core of the development of the brickwalk Grove Street Plaza. “I wanted to open a coffee shop here,” she says. “The idea at the time was just to restore two of the houses and put a coffee shop in the ground floor of one. Of course it didn’t work out that way, but it’s kind of ironic that we’re

sitting here all these years later in a coffee shop that exceeds my expectations of what a good coffee shop should be.”

Those first few years were a long road. Penny bought the first property at the behest of Raymond D. Nurme, then-director of Darien planning and zoning, who had an inkling that the Grove Street area would be vital to the future success of

Two of the energetic powerhouses behind the transformation, David Genovese and Penny Glassmeyer, at Espresso Neat, located in the renovated brickwalk plaza

EXTERIOR BY KIKI KOROSHETZ; COFFEE AND PORTRAIT BY GUS CANTAVERO; HOUSE ICON BY I STOCKPHOTO.COM © TOM NULENS



The brickwalk plaza is just one of the more recent, pedestrian-friendly renovations in town.

downtown. Up to the point, Glassmeyer had been working on residential properties, but she so respected Nurme that she started acquiring the neglected properties.

“I worked for years with Ray Nurme and my architect,” says Glassmeyer. “Then Nurme retired in 1999 as I was about to get my P&Z approvals. At that point, they said I was building a monument to Ray Nurme and denied me. Then my architect passed away. So I started working on a new building.” That new plan didn’t make it through, but she wasn’t done with Grove Street.

Eventually, in 2002, Penny moved forward with her plans to develop the property. Concurrently, Tom Golden and Dwight Collins, both town residents, began their redevelopment of the Darien Playhouse, which sits catty-corner to Grove Street. “Grove Street and the theater helped to stimulate the idea,” says Glassmeyer. “People started to see what could be done in downtown Darien.”

## HELPING HANDS

In 2003 Evonne Klein was elected Darien’s first selectman. During her first month in office, she received a mailing

that mentioned the Connecticut Main Street Center program, which was helping downtown areas become more productive. This nonprofit was sponsored by Connecticut Light & Power and the Connecticut Department of Economic and Community Development.

“I remember thinking that we had good bones and that Tom Golden and Penny Glassmeyer had started something, but we definitely needed help,” says Klein. “Penny had a vision and she understood how important mixed-use development was to the success of downtown, but there was a lack of direction at the time. There was little guidance available for how we could attract and improve other businesses in the downtown. I knew this was a great opportunity to improve our community.”

Klein had support but also faced resistance from those who didn’t share the idea of a new downtown. “Some critics liked Darien the way it was,” she says. “[Some] thought it couldn’t be done and that we wouldn’t be accepted into the program, so they weren’t keen on helping out.”

Undeterred, Klein put together the Downtown Darien Committee to complete

“We do have some plans for the future, to expand the footprint... create more of a village like New Canaan.”

– Penny Glassmeyer

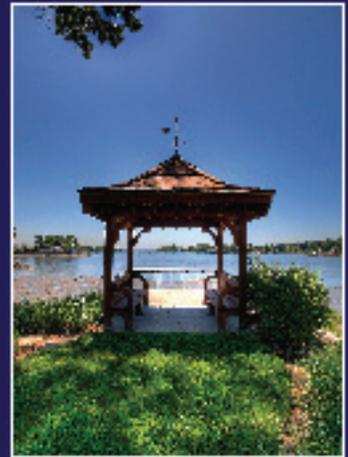
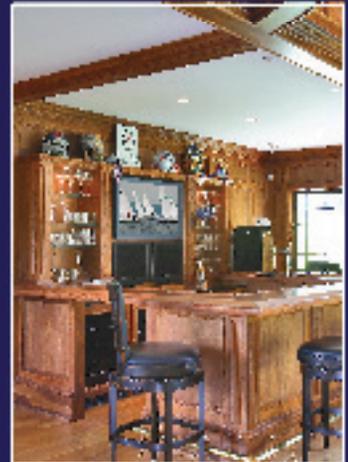


the program's lengthy application process; one of the people she turned to for help was Darien-bred David Genovese, a childhood friend of one of Glassmeyer's sons. Genovese had left a job in finance and moved back to Darien and was busy buying and renovating local properties. It took a year to finish the application, but Darien was eventually accepted into the program in June 2005. The town then had to establish the Darien Revitalization Initiative, a

nonprofit, as part of the Main Street program, which required a non-profit to run it; CMSC provided only guidance, not funding. And so began the work of raising capital. Genovese stepped up, offering to cohost, with local business owner Tom Geary, the first fundraiser.

### THE PEOPLE SPEAK

"When we held that first fundraiser and 400 people showed up and wrote checks,



## Eye on the Local Landscape

Lesley MacAulay was at the forefront of an effort to create a cohesive plan for the landscape design of Darien. For this, she was honored as DRI's Volunteer of the Year in 2008. She remains active as a member of the Darien Beautification Commission, which has worked to landscape the train station

and the Veteran's Memorial as well as to hang flower baskets on street lamps and manage Adopt-A-Spot, the program that allows local businesses to maintain portions of town property.



### How does your landscape design plan address some of the challenges in creating a cohesive downtown in Darien?

[As an example,] I picked six or seven tree varieties that could be planted and stipulated that no two species could be planted side-by-side within three planting beds of each other. This creates an episodic connection as you drive through town. Other towns, for example Westport, haven't done that, and it's a bit of a jarring effect. Unfortunately, there's not much you can do about the train trestle, which breaks up our downtown into two areas.

### What did you contribute to the new design at the Darien train station?

This spring I am going to be planting self-seeding flowering plants on the northbound side, near the stairs. The energy of the train will create a corridor of wind that will reseed

flowers along the entire stretch. Last year I was able to plant daffodils on the hill in the parking lot in a pattern that represents the ebb and flow of the tidal chart of Darien. Look for them again this spring.

### What planning aspects helped New Canaan's downtown area?

New Canaan has buried utilities; Darien had the chance to do that a number of years ago, but passed. To do that now is probably not feasible. The utilities create an eyesore, and the trees suffer as they have to be trimmed so as not to interfere with them. We also can't plant shrubs due to the makeup of the sidewalks and lack of barriers. New Canaan's [angle] parking creates a natural barrier, and they're not on a state road. They also have really wide sidewalks and not as many driveways cutting into the main drag. Many New Canaanites do envy our hanging baskets though!

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the [town] government realized that there was real support for the program,” says Genovese. “That was a statement by the people. When developers put forth ideas to P&Z, it is one-off decision making; it’s not looking at the whole picture. The value of the Main Street Center program was that they were like management consultants to the downtown; they came to town with experts who could tell us what we were doing right and wrong, and if we wanted a more vibrant downtown, here are five things that could stimulate that.”

Jessica Curtis is head of the Retail Services Group at CB Richard Ellis, a real estate services firm in New York City, handling properties in Connecticut; she provides retail and restaurant leasing services and consulting (including Black Goose Grill and Sails). If anyone were to express concern that Glassmeyer and Genovese have had too much control

“I have a **different sense of responsibility.** I live in this town—if I brought in a bad tenant, I’d hear about it.”

— David Genovese

over what is happening in Darien, she says, “David and Penny have committed to bringing in the right tenants for the town. They are unusual landlords in that they are more interested in the big picture than the highest dollar amount. Their tenants are mostly local, unique stores that make Darien quite different from the surrounding towns that have many national retailers lining their streets.”

Genovese explains, “I have a different sense of responsibility. I live in this town—if I brought in a bad tenant, I’d

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hear about it. I also believe in helping out other developers. I helped Penny get Go Figure; I'd been working with them elsewhere and thought they would actually fit better here, with Neat. Penny and I work together, and we like to help the other landlords as well."

### WHAT'S NEXT?

What does the future hold for our towns? With the Main Street Center project over, who is now steering the ship—and to where?

"I think New Canaan is the dream," Glassmeyer concludes. "We do have some plans for the future to expand the footprint of downtown to create other areas, create more of a village like New Canaan."

New Canaan's tried-and-true local retail shops, such as The Whitney Shop, Pennyweights, Togs, and Candy Nichols, are staying put alongside national chains like J.Crew and Ralph Lauren; and new stores, like The Cosmetic Boutique and Mason, are opening their doors here. Over in Rowayton, on the other hand, there is still retail space available, despite the town's obvious appeal and attractive developments, such as the Rowayton Market and two popular restaurants. But even the cosmetic changes made this past summer to a swath of buildings downtown do not speak to a clear development plan.

Genovese agrees with Penny about Darien's future, saying, "We need to increase the depth of town. The new building I've built on Old Kings Highway has some flexibility to that end. It was built as an office building but could easily be converted to retail and apartments if the town spreads out."

Evonne Klein was pleased at a meeting of The League of Women Voters of New Canaan when the question of how New Canaan could learn from Darien's success was raised. "My answer is, start with people," says Klein. "You need the initiative of property owners and developers and the support of the community." 



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