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MSBA COMMUNITY LIAISON & PAST PRESIDENT **ALBERT S. BENNETT** **WINS 2010 VILLAGE AWARD**

Albert S. Bennett has been named a winner of the prestigious annual Village Award for 2010 by the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation. The award will be presented at the GVSHP Annual Meeting on Monday, June 7, at 6:30 p.m. at the New School's Tishman Auditorium (66 West 12th Street). A reception will follow at The Forbes Galleries, 60 Fifth Avenue.

The Annual Village Awards honor people, places, and organizations that contribute significantly to the quality of life in Greenwich Village, the East Village, and NoHo.

The timing of Albert's honor this year—the year of the 20th Annual Awards—is particularly meaningful because it coincides the 30th anniversary of the GVSHP and the 85th birthday (later this summer) of our own Village Treasure. He has been nominated several years running by appreciative fans, but the competition is fierce and only one individual is normally selected out of hundreds of nominations (other awards are given to businesses, institutions, and structures). Last year, Albert was a finalist. This year, the awards committee was unable to select between two finalists, so for the first time two individual awards were made: the other goes to Lucy Cecere, a co-founder of The Caring Community and The Village Nursing Home.

We congratulate Albert on this well deserved recognition, which has been a long time coming. We are also proud to note that our Bedford Triangle garden (intersection of Morton, Bedford, and Seventh Avenue South) won an award in 2008.



May 12, 2009: Albert Bennett spoke in support of the South Village Historic District at a landmarking meeting in Father Demo hall at Our Lady of Pompeii Church. (Photo courtesy of Bob Estremera and the GVSHP)



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Albert S. Bennett has been making enormous contributions to our Morton Street neighborhood and to his beloved Greenwich Village for more years than many of you have even been living. Albert has lived on Morton Street for 55 years, and for much of that time he has been an active and effective advocate for the preservation of the unique qualities that make the Village a wonderful place to live.

Albert has been passionately involved in all the big issues, especially those involving the waterfront and landmarking: he's been a longstanding warrior in the fight against inappropriate commercialization of Pier 40; he tried valiantly to save Pier 42 (the Morton Street pier); and he has battled for years — and continues to do so — against rezoning and the issuance of zoning variances that allow developers to build structures that would destroy the character of the Village. Two such struggles included the application for a zoning variance for developers of the old Yellow Freight property (which ended in defeat, allowing Morton Square to be built) and the rezoning of Hudson Square North, which includes the western half of Morton Street (mixed results). Another rezoning battle affecting the north side of the west end of our street was won when the application was withdrawn after Albert's forceful testimony on more than one occasion before the City Planning Commission.

Zoning issues are extremely complex, and Albert is probably the only member of our block association conversant enough with their intricacies to mount effective challenges. Mayor Bloomberg will probably not forget the time (August 2004) when he ventured into the Village for a public forum, only to be challenged by Albert with pointed questions on his administration's granting of variances that are not subject to review.

A labor of love to which Albert has donated most

of the past decade is the creation of new historic districts in the Village, especially those that would protect the waterfront and the parts of Morton Street that are not in the Greenwich Village Historic District. He was an early proponent of plans for a Waterfront Historic District to protect the western end of Morton Street along with the rest of the Greenwich Village waterfront; and of a South Village Historic District, to include the easternmost block of Morton Street with a swath south of Washington Square. Albert has participated in the planning every step of the way, attending meetings, offering testimony, making suggestions, and keeping the folks on Morton Street informed as the original proposals were carved into an ever evolving series of smaller historic districts with changing names: the Maritime Mile Historic District (HD), the Far West Village HD, the Gansevoort Market HD, the Weehawken Street HD, the Greenwich Village HD Extension, and the Greenwich Village HD Extension II. The Gansevoort Market HD was designated in 2003 as the first part of the Maritime Mile HD, and two others (Weehawken and Greenwich Village Extension) were designated in 2006.

Designation of the GVHD Extension II is now well on the way to a vote by the Landmarks Preservation Commission (scheduled for June 22). Albert circulated petitions and was instrumental in strengthening CB2's original weak resolution in support of what was then being called the South Village Historic District. His testimony was influential in the inclusion of two individual structures (the Hudson Street branch of the NY Public Library and the Tony Dapolito Recreation Center), although to his great disappointment, a third—City-As-School—was not included (even though he got a laugh when he testified that the century-old public school should be included because he has voted there for the past half century). With this newest Historic District, the eastern block of Morton Street will finally be protected.



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One of our favorite stories about Albert is related to his love of the waterfront. He has often recalled the days when friends could socialize on the pier in the shadow of the John W. Brown schoolship, and for years his battle cry was "SAVE THE MORTON STREET PIER!" When his vigorous efforts to save the pier came to naught, he and other Village activists from the Greenwich Village Community Task Force designed a plaque describing the pier's history and its historic importance, including lines identifying the pier as "Part of the community-proposed Greenwich Village Waterfront Historic District." Permission to have it installed where the pier had once been was held up by the Hudson River Park Trust, so early on the morning of July 3, 2000, Albert and two others mounted a guerrilla action: they affixed the plaque to the fence just south of the pier, where it stayed for about 10 days (and was seen by the crowds who were on the pier for the July 4 Op Sail celebration). Then it mysteriously disappeared.

Permission from the Hudson River Park Trust to have the plaque permanently installed was eventually denied, but Albert tried for years to find a place where it could be displayed. The sticking point seemed to be that line about the Greenwich Village Waterfront Historic District, which the HRPT did not want to recognize. When the waterfront area that includes the old Morton Street pier is finally landmarked, Albert will no doubt be ready with a new plaque to try again!

Another product of Albert's love and knowledge of the waterfront can be seen in the 2002 publication of *Maritime Mile*, a treasure of a book published by the Greenwich Village Community Task Force, which he co-authored with Stuart Waldman. The book, which contains photographs by Zack Wines-tine, highlights the beauty and historical importance of the waterfront neighborhoods. In a scholarly tour de force, Albert provided archival captions describing the history of each illustrated building.

Albert has done all this and more as a member of numerous committees and task forces, most notably as Public Member of the CB2 Landmarks Committee, as Landmarks Chair of the Greenwich Village Community Task Force, and as a member of GVSHP's South Village Historic District Advisory Board. He has appeared many times before the CB2 Waterfront Committee in his fight for a Pier 40 Maritime Mile Museum, an ongoing battle in which he has garnered support in high places. As a member of the Landmarks Committee, he was a non-voting (but vocal) member of the Omnibus Committee formed two years ago to address concerns about the St. Vincent's Hospital demolition and redevelopment plans. In the past he has also been Representative to the Landmarks Preservation Commission from CB2; member of CB2's Landmarking Task Force; Chair of the Committee on Plaques of the Greenwich Village Community Task Force, and member of the Coalition for a Safe Washington and Greenwich Street.

In addition to all of the accomplishments outlined above, Albert has also done an enormous amount of nuts-and-bolts work right here in our two-block area of Morton Street. As a founding member of the Morton Street Block Association (which was organized in its present form in 1993), he has served on its Executive Board since 1996, first as Vice President and then as President. He would still be President to this day if we could have talked him into it, but in 2007 he gave up that post to become Community Liaison, an office created expressly for him in recognition of his effectiveness in representing the MSBA at the many meetings and events and hearings—and on the numerous committees and task forces—that had already come to consume his life.

In his new office (and as Past President), Albert remains on the MSBA's Executive Board and provides us with a voice on important issues facing



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the community. He also writes a column in our quarterly newsletter and reports back to his neighbors at monthly MSBA meetings, keeping us well informed about developments in the Village that will have an impact on our lives.

As MSBA President, Albert spent over a decade dealing with issues such as graffiti, the procurement of public trash cans, film shoots, traffic signs, illegal bars, and tree pits (all of the 40+ trees on our two-block area had their garden pits enclosed by Belgian blocks and iron hoops under Albert's watch). He called himself "The Tyrant," and to this day he is known affectionately by that name among block association members (who also know that the nickname is completely unjustified!).

Among any group of Villagers there are contentious issues, and sometimes Albert was affected by the stresses of high office to which even a Tyrant is not immune. After one particularly grueling period, he wrote in his column: "I spent the spring and summer of 1945 on Okinawa, during the last and bloodiest battle of World War II. The past few weeks on Morton Street were far worse." He explained that on Okinawa, at least he never felt that the Japanese were attacking him personally. In spite of it all, however, he persevered as President for eleven years.

Albert's newsletter column (as well as many separate articles he wrote on historic districts, architecture, etc.) merits special mention as it is one of his many contributions to the Village that make him deserving of this award. The column made its inaugural appearance in the March 1997 issue of the *Morton Street News* under the heading "From the President's Desk," and it has appeared in every issue without a break to the present day, now bearing the title "Report From the Community Liaison." In the first column we learned of the rewards of volunteering at God's Love We Deliver (an activity that Albert eventually had to give up when his other re-

sponsibilities mushroomed), among other things.

Another article by Albert in the same issue reflected his enduring interest in the history and architecture of the neighborhood: it recounted the story of the extension of Seventh Avenue that began in 1914 and forever changed the geography of Morton Street. In the 13 years of columns that followed, Albert traced the unfolding of events as the Hudson River Park was built, Morton Square was constructed, Pier 42 was demolished, Pier 40 was fought over, and historic district proposals came and went — all the while not forgetting to deal with graffiti, tree guards, film shoots, disruptive business establishments, flower planting — and more graffiti.

To conclude with a recent triumph: it could be said that Albert single-handedly saved the West Village Post Office on Hudson Street, where the MSBA has a PO box. Last summer when the branch was threatened with closing, Congressman Jerry Nadler held a press conference and rally in front of the post office. Albert held up the MSBA postal box key and said, "This is the key to our box. . . and if this office dies, the Morton Street Block Association will die, too." Nadler replied, "Well, we can't let that happen!" — and it didn't!

In the December 2001 MSBA newsletter Albert wrote the following poem, which bears repeating here because—with his typical light touch—he manages to allude to both the mundane house-keeping chores and the weightier tasks that he has combined so successfully in protecting and caring for the Village that he loves:

Tree pits and tulips,
A judge's summation,
Waterfront Districts
and pier preservation,
Wagons and buckets,
Triangular rings:

These are a few of my Favorite Things!
(with apologies to Oscar Hammerstein II)