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**MEA  
KAEMMERLEN  
SERENDIPITY**

# A town's fabulous facelift

**W**hen I was a kid in the '50s, we'd sometimes drive to the Jersey Shore. From Princeton, we'd head straight east, through Hightstown, Freehold, Asbury Park and then south to Bay Head.

From my vantage point in the back of the Chrysler, Hightstown was another down-at-the-mouth Jersey town. The big, pointy Victorian houses were chipping paint and the plentiful street bars were dark and forbidding. We didn't slow down in Hightstown.

Things have changed. Nowadays, I slow down and stop in Hightstown, at the Slow Down Café, Guatemalan bakery and high-end sensible-shoe store. It's not a prissy suburb but a real town, with aged infrastructure, diverse population, energy and potential.

Not long ago, I was asked to come and see the recent facelift of Hightstown's downtown streetscape. It's not the first time I've been summoned. A few years back, Skip Cox, former Hightstown mayor and No. 1 fan, gave me a whirlwind tour of the town's every nook and cranny. By the end of that coldest, snowiest day of the year, I'd joined both Hightstown's and Skip's fan club. (Skip, unfortunately, died two years ago.)

Now Ann Marie Wiedemann, head of the Greater Hightstown East Windsor Improvement Project (GHEWIP—"Gee-wip"), wanted to show me some under-the-radar work being done by the private and public sectors cooperatively.

We sat in the cheerful Slow Down Café, slowly drinking our dark-roast coffee from china cups — no Styrofoam here — and looking out at the many old-fashioned street lamps festooned with wreaths, garlands and red ribbons.

She told me Hightstown has no chamber of commerce, so, 14 years ago, a group of business people and residents stepped in and formed Ghewip. Since then, backed by Hightstown's Public Works Department and with the occasional support of the Masons, historical society and other groups, the group has contributed ideas, resources, labor and \$300,000 toward fixing up the mile-and-a-quarter-square downtown. Ann Marie said, "We stay behind the scene. We're looking only to better the community."

The wreath-decked street lamps are their doing. In summer, great mounds of colorful flowers cascade from the lamp-posts.

They've installed a large, centrally located Indiana limestone fountain decorated with horse heads and surrounded by brick pavers where, years ago, there was a watering trough for horses.

Signage is the current project. The piece de resistance is drilled into the giant railroad abutment on the way into town: huge cranberry-colored letters spelling "Historic Hightstown Est. 1721." On every corner are handsome directional signs to stores, restaurants and free parking.

Ann Marie and I were soon joined by fellow-Ghewipper Gary Grubb, a resident since 1957 and chief money-raiser for the flower baskets; Mike Vanderbeck, Slow Down proprietor who is hard at work applying for a "Main Street" grant from the National Historic Preservation Trust; and Larry Blake, former fire chief and head of the Public Works Department.

"Larry Blake is our real hero," Anne Marie said to me. "Nothing could get done without him and his crew."

Larry looked sheepish. "We had to fluff more bows." Hard to imagine this big, burley guy and his grounds crew fluffing anything. But, in a small town, odd alliances form. The Rocky Brook Garden Club had supplied the gorgeous wreaths with huge red bows. The Public Works Crew had transported and installed them.

Turned out that the crew had slightly crushed the bows. Therefore, it was up each lamppost to fluff the bows. The former fire chief said sweetly, "We do whatever it takes to get the job done."

The citizens of Hightstown should be proud. I recommend a holiday outing to admire their hard work, fluffed red bows and all.

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