

To: Camden County Freeholders

Camden County Parks Division, CCOS Director Jack Sworaski
& Walt Whitman Arts Center

From: Darcy Cummings



c/o Elizabeth Hanson Kuehner Trust
201 Cedar Avenue
Somerdale, NJ 08083

**RE: Passive Open Space Preservation Stewardship via WWAC
of Block 61, Lot 1 & Block 62, Lot 5, Laurel Springs, NJ**

I am among those who support the proposal to see the above-cited wooded lakefront land in Laurel Springs become **Whitman Woods**, to the benefit of area school children, local and Laurel Springs residents and Whitman's Camden County legacy itself. I am asking the Freeholders to grant **Walt Whitman Arts Center** the funding to save the land from development. In addition to preserving much-needed Open Space, WWAC has the potential to create an enduring national connection between Walt Whitman's legacy, his local celebration of Nature and his lasting contributions to American Literature and the Arts.

I have always thought that the connection between Laurel Springs, the Whitman Stafford Farm House and Whitman's heritage in Camden County should be as well known as is Henry David Thoreau's connection to Walden Pond in Concord, Mass., or at least as well known regionally as are the Whitman House in Camden and the poet's grave in Harleigh Cemetery. Whitman spent many happy hours, days and summers on the banks of Laurel Lake and wrote extensively about the area.

I learned more about this connection in 2013 during the Laurel Springs Centennial Celebration. As a resident, I wanted to contribute to the celebration; as a poet, essayist and student of American Literature, I wanted to work with students in the local elementary school, connecting the town's history and Whitman with the writing of poetry. I obtained a grant from the **Camden County Cultural & Heritage Commission**, with additional funds from the Whitman Stafford Committee, the Laurel Springs Board of Education, the Recreation Committee and the Lions Club to present a Poetry & Art Program to students at the Laurel Springs School. Two poets and an artist met with grades 1 to 5 and helped the students write poetry and create poetry kites. I was very impressed by how cooperative and eager the school's teachers and principal were to participate in the program. The school itself has a real commitment to the Arts, as does the town. In addition to myself, there are a number of poets, prose writers and visual artists living in Laurel Springs. Most, if not all, of us will proactively support establishing

Whitman Woods as Passive Open Space and, by association, as an extended springtime classroom for area teachers, poets and artists.

I have taught for more than 20 years for the "Writers in the Schools" project funded by the **New Jersey Council on the Arts**, and have taught literature and writing at area colleges, including Stockton, Penn, Rowan and most recently, **Rutgers Camden**. I've published two books of poetry, and received awards from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts (poetry fellowships), the Dodge Foundation, the corporation of Yaddo and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. I am committed to helping develop the Arts both in the county and in our town to people of all ages -- school children, adults and the elderly -- and pledge to volunteer with WWAC in any way that I can to help utilize Whitman Woods as an extended classroom -- from celebrating the Arts to studying Whitman's beloved Nature.

Again, I respectfully ask that the Freeholders grant WWAC the funds needed to establish Whitman Woods for the collective good of Camden County.

Thank you for your serious attention to this community effort.

Darcy Cummings

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Attachments:

1. A collaborative poem written in the Whitman style by 4th Grade Laurel Springs Elementary School students as part of a class I taught for the town's 2013 Centennial Celebration.
2. My résumé.