

Historic mansion opens its gates as a fundraising effort for Purvis Community Health Center

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Daryl and Kathy Kemerer, of Butler, look at maps of the estate during the Wine and Jazz at Elm Court Gardens fundraiser for the Jean B. Purvis Community Health Center on Sunday in Butler. Joseph Ressler/Butler Eagle 6/26/22

On Sunday the gate leading to Elm Court opened offering some a glimpse at the mansion hidden in Butler's hills.

Beyond the gate, a long driveway bends along the hill and showcases colorful gardens and various species of trees. Only around the final bend can anyone truly see the large mansion known as Elm Court.

In front of the courtyard was sign-in table and a No. 1, representing the start of the tours.

"It's gorgeous," said Conni Mazzoni, of Cranberry Township. "I grew up in Butler. I never knew it was here."

Her husband, Bruce Mazzoni, said the property is well hidden from the road below.

"It's like an estate in France or England," Bruce Mazzoni said. "It's majestic."

The tour the Mazzoni and others bought tickets for was part of the Wine and Jazz at Elm Court Gardens fundraiser for the Jean B. Purvis Community Health Center.

The center is a nonprofit organization that provides care for uninsured Butler County residents. The center provides medical health services, as well as behavioral, vision and dental care.



Attendees learn about the history, gardens, and architecture from docents during the Wine and Jazz at Elm Court Gardens fundraiser for the Jean B. Purvis Community Health Center on Sunday in Butler. Joseph Ressler/Butler Eagle 6/26/22

"We have events like this to pay for those services," said Kim Reamer, the center's executive director.

Jim Cunningham, who serves as both vice president of the center's board and director of development, said the center operates on an annual budget of about \$500,000.

"We have to raise every dime," Cunningham said.

Cunningham and Reamer were thankful to the Frederick R. Koch Foundation for allowed them to use the historic mansion.

"They believe in our mission," Reamer said.



Attendees look from a balcony during the Wine and Jazz at Elm Court Gardens fundraiser for the Jean B. Purvis Community Health Center on Sunday in Butler. Joseph Ressler/Butler Eagle 6/26/22

The foundation

In February of 2020, the most recent owner of the property Frederick R. Koch died at his Manhattan home.

In the months following Koch's death, his longtime friend, John Olsen, established a foundation to continue caring for Koch's many historic estates, including Elm Court.

Olsen, now a trustee of the foundation, attended Sunday's event and assisted with tours. He said the foundation is not a giving one, at least not in terms of grants or funding, but it can offer other nonprofit organizations an inspirational venue to conduct their own fundraisers.

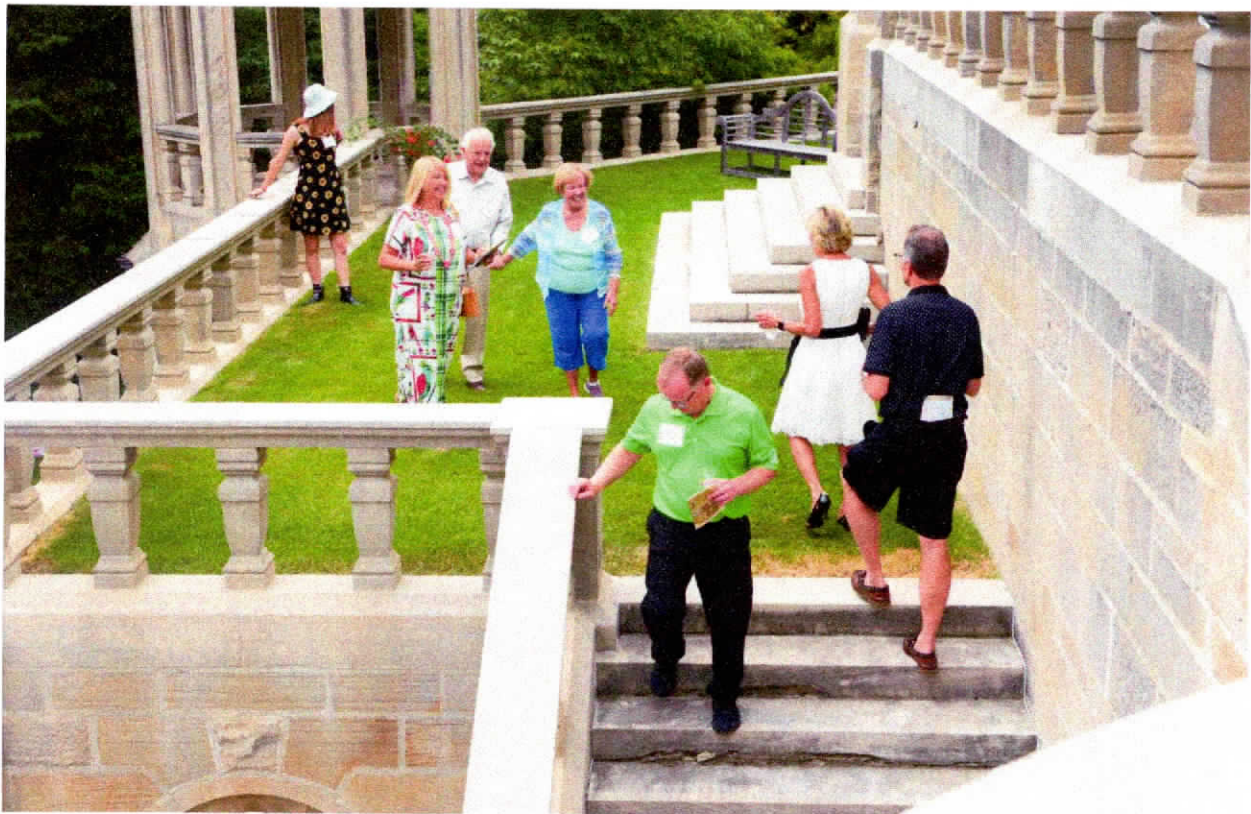
Olsen said Koch was a true supporter of history and the arts, voraciously consuming books, music, film and any other forms of expression.

Olsen said he hopes someday the foundation could be in a place to support learning in these areas through the form of scholarship, but for now, it is focused on the upkeep of Koch's properties.

The foundation also allows the use of Koch's properties for performances and other activities that further the arts and humanities, civil discourse and the common good, according to its website.

Koch's Butler mansion has been the setting of a web series called "Live from Elm Court," a video concert series featuring emerging classical artists. The videos are available through the foundation's website and YouTube channels.

"The mission of the foundation is to support the arts and artists," Olsen said.



Attendees navigate the terraced landscape during the Wine and Jazz at Elm Court Gardens fundraiser for the Jean B. Purvis Community Health Center on Sunday in Butler. Joseph Ressler/Butler Eagle 6/26/22

Elm Court

While most recently owned by the late Frederick R. Koch, Elm Court was built for B.D. Phillips, the son the founder and namesake of T.W. Phillips Gas & Oil Co., according to its 1979 entry to the National Register of Historic Places.

Building of the Tudor-Gothic-style mansion began in 1929 and finished in 1930.

The core of the mansion features a 40-room structure surrounding a courtyard decorated with flowers and fountain features.

“The exterior of the house, picturesquely irregular in configuration, is characterized by numerous typically Tudor features: Complex slate roofs with many gables, large groups of rectangular windows, rich oriel and bay windows, interesting chimney treatments and intricately carved stone detailing,” said one description in the register entry.



Sandi Baker, onsite estate manager, talks about the English-inspired architecture during the Wine and Jazz at Elm Court Gardens fundraiser for the Jean B. Purvis Community Health Center on Sunday in Butler. Joseph Ressler/Butler Eagle 6/26/22

The home also features English-style wooden doors and a multitude of stain-glass windows.

According to a tour guide, in 1988 Fredrick R. Koch bought Elm Court while inspecting a catalog of properties at a Sotheby's auction, according to one tour guide.

"He bought it without seeing it, then when he saw it, he really loved it," the tour guide said.

As the tours continued around the property, many of the guides talked about how Koch revitalized and expanded the property, which now encompasses 16 acres, a swimming pool and and a theater.

Sandi Baker, the onsite estate manager, said she worked for Koch for 15 years in her current capacity, managing the staff to keep the home and grounds in order. She said she hopes to continue working with the foundation to preserve the Butler property.

"It's a once in a lifetime experience," Baker said.



Attendees enjoy beverages and hors d'oeuvres by the pool area during the Wine and Jazz at Elm Court Gardens fundraiser for the Jean B. Purvis Community Health Center on Sunday in Butler. Joseph Ressler/Butler Eagle 6/26/22

Visitor reactions

While the interior of the mansion was off-limits for Sunday's purposes, the exterior offered more than enough to wow the crowd, according to visitors.

Briant Hortert of Center Township said he had heard stories about the estate, and whenever he would drive down North Main Street hill in the fall, he could barely see pieces of the property.

Hortert said he loved the way it's tucked into the hillside.

"We've never seen up close and personal like this," he said. "It's a hidden treasure."



Servers provide hors d'oeuvres during the Wine and Jazz at Elm Court Gardens fundraiser for the Jean B. Purvis Community Health Center on Sunday in Butler. Joseph Ressler/Butler Eagle 6/26/22

Julia Bianchin walked alongside her mother, Delia Bianchin, both of Butler.

"It's all so pretty," Julia said. "It's hard to pick a favorite feature."

Delia Bianchin said she had visited the estate eight years ago, and Julia was a little jealous she got to see an amazing place. She said she was happy to bring her this time with the added bonus of supporting the Purvis Center for which she once served on the board.

"The center is important. It bridges that gap for people who can't afford healthcare," Delia Bianchin said. "It's nice to see the kind of support that exists."



Attendees arrive at the main entrance during the Wine and Jazz at Elm Court Gardens fundraiser for the Jean B. Purvis Community Health Center on Sunday in Butler. Joseph Ressler/Butler Eagle 6/26/22