

THE *Morningsider*

Number 5

November-December 2020



All politics is...

Also Inside:

Local Resources, Commentary, Back-Page Diversion

Local? Zero-Sum? Folly?

As we shift into holiday mode and close out a difficult year, let's review events and observations surrounding Election Day.

U.S. politics jumped the shark in 2020. Long-time election norms have become quaint and our divisions now define us. There are lessons:

- The importance of local communities has increased dramatically. They have become *the* critical arena in defining values, agreeing on priorities, and making policy impacts.
- It is possible to expand the greater good: Benefits to some do not have to come at the expense of others' well-being.
- Our political arena is as much of a circus as we allow. In the wake of recent drama, it can become a place of growing transparency, rational debate, and sensible reform.

These outcomes are only possible if citizens engage in public life and demand them. As always, the first step is knowing your audience.

All politics is that.



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Continuing to Adapt:

Haunted Fountain at the Cathedral offered a socially distanced and safe [opportunity](#) for neighborhood families to celebrate Halloween.

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Local Engagement

Comments & Questions

MHCC is committed to understanding local perspectives. We would appreciate hearing your views. Please send us a note [here](#).

- *I believe the developers of luxury co-ops and rentals should give a portion of the tax breaks to a fund to revitalize the empty storefronts for small businesses and for funding of affordable housing. John H.*
- *Back in the day, when storefronts were “mom and pop” stores, shopkeepers actually swept and often hosed sidewalks daily. With the influx of corporate-owned food businesses that put out mostly food waste on the sidewalks for pickup, the result is often a stinky, greasy and disgusting mess. Alina D.*
- *We do not want more condominiums in our city, especially not in Morningside Heights. There are plenty of empty condos in the 60s & 70s. Giselle G.*

Calendar

As public health guidelines allow, MHCC will plan events to foster engagement.

We will announce our next event soon. In the meantime, please let us know if you have [suggestions](#) for socially distanced or virtual gatherings in support of local community development efforts.

Volunteering & Funding

- The vast majority of MHCC’s work is carried out by volunteers. We are grateful to them. If you’d like to be involved, please let us know [here](#).
- **MHCC has launched its annual fund-raising appeal. Please consider a [donation](#) in support of our ongoing work.**

And...Action!

- MHCC has expressed great concern over plans by Columbia and Barnard to invite more students to campus than were here in the fall. Please join us in expressing your [views](#).
- Free COVID testing is available throughout the city. To find sites, please click [here](#).
- Flu vaccines are especially important this year. Click [here](#) to find a location near you.
- Please sign the [petition](#) to landmark McGiffert Hall. This historic building may be under threat and more than 600 neighbors have already signed.

Issues & Campaigns

MHCC's work depends on the input and participation of community members. Following are brief updates on our progress. As we continue to expand our reach and impacts, please consider a [donation](#) to MHCC. Our efforts rely on contributions from our neighbors.

COVID: MHCC concerns over the reopening of local institutions have been conveyed to their administrations, elected officials, and the media since June. We are monitoring conditions and advocate for clearer information-sharing and greater community resources, including rapid COVID testing, from local institutions. MHCC is advocating for the safest possible approach to holiday travel plans by students and employees. Please share your views on plans by Columbia and Barnard to invite students to campus in January [here](#).

Rezoning: We are following-up on stated support from Council Speaker Johnson to complete final steps in the development of a detailed community-focused plan. We are in discussions with City Council staff and others to advance the process of rezoning.

Affordable Housing: Discussions continue with local real estate developers to include affordable housing in projected residential construction. In addition, MHCC is proposing that local institutions maintain their rent-regulated properties in perpetuity.



Local Businesses: MHCC has convened a committee to assess best practices in supporting local businesses. We are discussing ideas with local business owners and employees. Would you like to [nominate](#) a “Business of the Month” for our next issue?

Real Estate Development: Three residential projects are nearing completion locally and an additional three are in development or under construction. MHCC advocates for inclusion of affordable housing and Community Benefits Agreements in talks with developers.

Health & Safety Corps: All local construction sites are visited weekly to assess code and safety compliance. Lack of face mask use by some personnel has been reported.

Elevator Lobby: Our proposal for the installation of elevators at the 125th Street station of the Number 1 Subway line has been shared with public and private stakeholders.

Focus: Community Support

MHCC would like to draw particular attention to two ways of supporting members of the Morningside Heights community.

The Morningside Heights Community Fund:

The MHCF was established through contributions from developers and institutions under MHCC's Community Benefits Agreements and from additional donations. The MHCC sub-committee has already allocated first-round MHCF funding of \$40,000 to local organizations focusing on food distribution, educational programs, senior care, and other areas requiring urgent support during the COVID crisis. The inaugural grant recipients were described in our last [issue](#).

A second round of funding will likely allocate up to \$100,000 in the first quarter of 2021.

Food and Clothing Drives:

Our most vulnerable community members are in particular need of material support. Here are three organizations which do great work. During this holiday season, donations of funds, clothing, or food would be a great way to help our neighbors.

Broadway Community (MHCF grant recipient): This neighborhood [program](#), lodged in the Broadway Presbyterian Church, provides food, shelter, clothing, and medical care to neighbors in need.

We Are Not Afraid: An outreach program of St. Mary's Episcopal Church (MHCF grant recipient), [WANA](#) has many programs designed to uplift vulnerable populations out of poverty. The program consists of a weekly food pantry, soup kitchen, mobile soup kitchen and fellowship program.

Cathedral Community Cares: Based at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, [CCC](#) operates, coordinates, and expands its direct service programs and advocacy campaigns based on the ever-unfolding, diverse needs of the community, while fostering self-sufficiency and cultivating social justice through outreach and education.

Feature:

The Politics of Morningside



A silver lining in the challenges that came to a head in 2020 is greater awareness of and engagement in civic issues across the United States.

Though Morningside Heights has a long history of activism, the past months will be remembered as a time of increased advocacy and public discourse stimulated by federal policymaking, the Black Lives Matter movement, COVID-19, and the economic downturn.

For their part, local government officials and community organizations have stepped into the fray in ways which reinforce the view that disengagement is not an option, if we are going to maintain and work to improve conditions at large.

Following are overviews of community and government offices that have direct impacts on our lives as Morningsiders. Granted, with these entries we're going back to basics. Now seems like a good time to do so. These offices exist to serve our community and depend on input from our neighbors and other community members in determining priorities.

MHCC does not endorse candidates. We do, however, engage with them and elected/appointed officials in presenting diverse local voices. We encourage you to contact these offices to let them know your views on the issues in their purviews.

This is the essence of democratic society. We ignore it at our individual and shared peril.



Community and City Offices

Manhattan Community Board 9

New York City Community Boards are composed of up to 50 volunteer members appointed by the borough presidents. Half of their members are nominated by city council members. Manhattan Community Board 9 (MCB9) ensures that City services are accessible and responsive to the needs of all residents, organizations, businesses, and institutions in West Harlem. The City Charter mandates that all community boards advise and inform their respective constituencies on matters relevant to their immediate neighborhood. Toward this end, MCB9 convenes standing and *ad hoc* committee meetings each month: Arts & Culture; Economic Development; Health & Environment; Landmarks Preservation/Parks; Housing, Land Use & Zoning; Uniformed Services & Transportation; Senior Issues; Strategic Planning; and Youth, Education, & Libraries.

Appointed Office Holder: Barry Weinberg, Chair (Editorial note: Mr. Weinberg serves on the MHCC Executive Committee.)

Contact Information: Telephone: (212) 864-6200; Email: info@cb9m.org

Notable Local Involvement: Among many other issues, MCB9 has been very active in promoting affordable housing, tenants' rights, and the rezoning of our neighborhood to prevent out-of-context and all-luxury development. The Board passed an affordable housing resolution that parallels MHCC's own resolution on the issue and has supported MHCC's vision of having all properties owned by institutions maintain their rent-regulated status permanently.

City Council District 7

The City Council is New York's legislative body and is composed of 51 members. It is separate from the Mayor's administration but an equal partner in how our city is run. Its main functions are to introduce and vote on legislation having to do with all aspects of city life, negotiating the city's budget with the mayor and approving its adoption, monitoring city agencies, and reviewing land use in making decisions about growth and development.

Elected Office Holder: City Council Member Mark Levine

Contact Information: Telephone: (212) 928-6814; Email: district7@council.nyc.gov

Notable Local Involvement: Council Member Levine has been heavily engaged in public health issues, particularly related to COVID-19. He has advanced rezoning and historic district efforts by MHCC and has worked with the organization to negotiate Community Benefits Agreements with local developers and institutions. He has played an active role in promoting local tenants' rights.

The Morningsider Quote: "Many families in Morningside Heights are struggling to pay their rent — even more so during the pandemic," says Council Member Levine. "We need to do everything we can to protect vulnerable tenants, preserve existing rent-regulated apartments, and create new affordable housing."

Manhattan Borough President

Borough presidents are responsible for oversight of a borough. They are responsible for making budget recommendations to the mayor of New York, allocating discretionary funds, proposing legislation in the New York City Council, appointing borough representatives to commissions and boards (including community boards), and holding public hearings on borough issues.

Elected Office Holder: Gale Brewer

Contact Information: Telephone: (212) 531-1609; Email: info@manhattanbp.nyc.gov

Notable Local Involvement: Borough President Brewer has been very active in advancing affordable housing, rezoning, and Community Benefits Agreements along side MHCC. She has also been a stalwart supporter of tenants' rights, economic development, historic preservation, and veterans' issues, among other priorities.

The Morningsider Quote: "The most pressing issue in Morningside Heights is the preservation of existing rent-stabilized housing stock," says Borough President Brewer. "The development of affordable housing and the preservation of neighborhood character are also top concerns."

Comptroller

The comptroller is New York City's chief financial officer. As an independently elected official, the comptroller safeguards the municipal fiscal health, roots out waste, fraud and abuse in local government, and ensures that municipal agencies serve the needs of all New Yorkers. The Comptroller's responsibilities include the following:

Conducting performance and financial audits of all City agencies; serving as a fiduciary to the City's five public pension funds; providing comprehensive oversight of the citywide budget and fiscal condition; reviewing contracts for integrity, accountability and fiscal compliance; resolving claims both on behalf of and against New York; ensuring transparency and accountability in setting prevailing wage and vigorously enforcing prevailing wage and living wage laws; and promoting policies that enhance city government's commitment to efficiency, integrity and performance for all New Yorkers.

Elected Office Holder: Scott Stringer

Contact Information: Telephone: (212) 669-3916; Email: action@comptroller.nyc.gov

Public Advocate

The public advocate is a non-voting member of the New York City Council with the right to introduce and co-sponsor legislation. The public advocate also serves as an ombudsman for city government, providing oversight for city agencies, investigating citizens' complaints about city services and making proposals to address perceived shortcomings or failures of those services. The public advocate serves on the committee which selects the director of the New York City Independent Budget Office and appoints members to several boards and commissions, including one member of the New York City Planning Commission. The public advocate also serves as chair of the Commission of Public Information and Communication. Along with the Mayor and the Comptroller, the public advocate is one of three municipal offices elected by all the city's voters. In the event of a vacancy or incapacity of the mayor, the public advocate is first in line to become mayor.

Elected Office Holder: Jumaane Williams

Contact Information: Telephone: (212) 669-7200; Email: reception@advocate.nyc.gov

Mayor

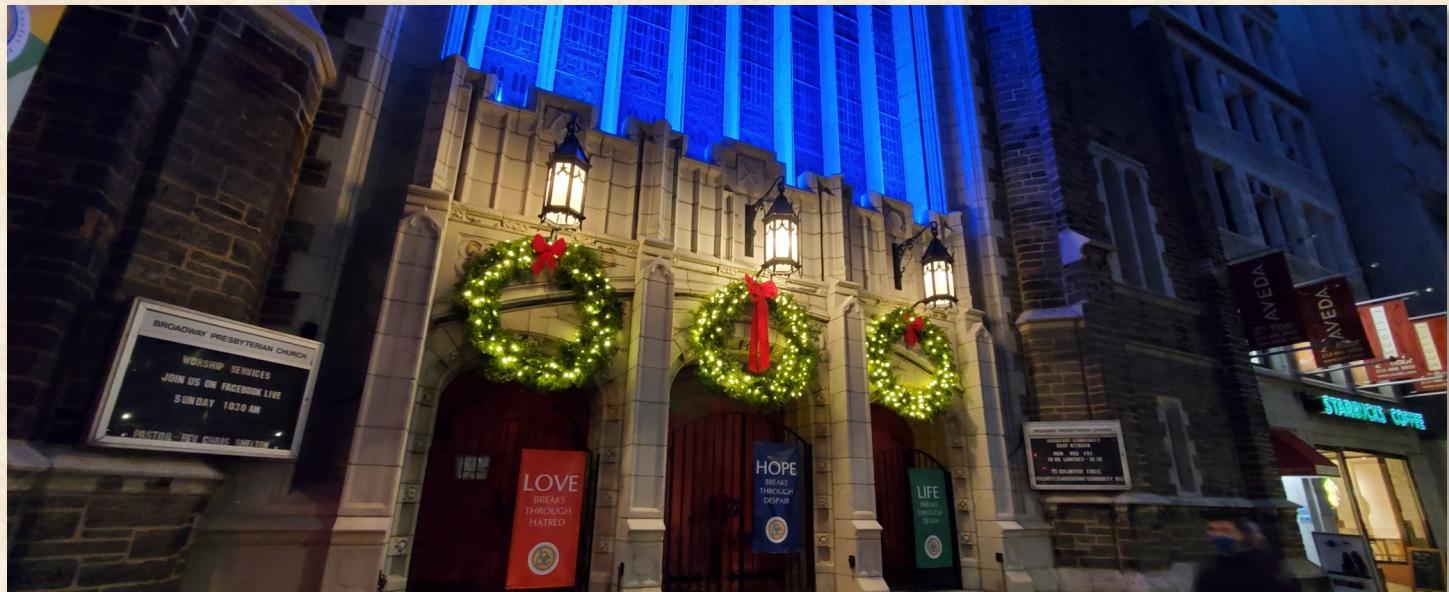
The mayor is head of the executive branch of the Government of New York City and has jurisdiction over all five boroughs of the City. The mayor's office administers all city services, public property, police and fire protection, most public agencies, and enforces all city and state laws within New York City. The City's budget is overseen by Mayor's Office of Management and Budget. The mayor appoints numerous officials, including

commissioners who head city departments, and his deputy mayors.

Elected Office Holder: Bill de Blasio

Contact Information: Telephone: (212) 639-9675 ; Online [here](#).

Notable Local Involvement: The mayor reversed a decision to forego rezoning of Morningside Heights in 2019. This critical local objective is now being discussed in the City Council. He is a graduate of Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs.



State Offices

State Assembly

The New York State Assembly is the lower chamber of the New York State Legislature. It is composed of 150 members. Alongside the New York State Senate, it forms the legislative branch of the New York state government and works alongside the governor to create laws and establish a state budget. Legislative authority and responsibilities of the New York State Assembly include passing bills on public policy matters, setting levels for state spending, raising and lowering taxes, and voting to uphold or override gubernatorial vetoes.

District 69

Elected Office Holder: Daniel O'Donnell

Contact Information: Telephone: (212) 866-3970; Email: odonelld@assembly.nys.gov

Notable Local Involvement: Assemblyman O'Donnell has been involved in many initiatives focused on protecting and improving our community. These range from supporting the establishment of our historic district designation to opposing luxury over-development in Morningside Heights. He has been a strong advocate for tenants' rights, LGBTQ protections, access to health care, and improving our parks. Recently, he supported MHCC's campaign to seek additional information on plans by Columbia and Barnard to invite undergraduate students to campus in the fall, despite rising coronavirus infection rates. He authored a letter co-signed by other key officials on this issue.

The Morningsider Quote: "The impacts of the pandemic will continue to be daunting and urgent," says Assembly Member O'Donnell. "Too many neighbors are unemployed (and too many are struggling to get the Department of Labor to pay them unemployment - if you know someone in this position, please have them contact my office). Too many local businesses are struggling - and have been since long before the virus. Too many are at risk of losing their housing, food access, and more. Of course, this is all on top of the health risks we all share in this challenging time. And yet, I have been deeply inspired by how our neighborhood has come together this past year, organizing food drives, wearing masks, and finding innovative ways to support local business. These stories give me hope that our community will come roaring back as soon as we can."

District 70

Elected Office Holder: Inez Dickens

Contact Information: Telephone: (212) 866-5809; Email: DickensI@nyassembly.gov

Notable Local Involvement: Assembly Member Dickens has been a strong supporter of human and civil rights, social justice, and economic development in our community, especially through support for locally owned businesses.

State Senate

The New York State Senate is the upper chamber of the New York State Legislature. It is composed of 63 members. Alongside the New York State Assembly, it forms the legislative branch of the New York state government and works alongside the governor to create laws and establish a state budget. Legislative authority and responsibilities of the New York State Senate include passing bills on public policy matters, setting levels for state spending, raising and lowering taxes, and voting to uphold or override gubernatorial vetoes.

District 30

Elected Office Holder: Brian Benjamin

Contact Information: Telephone: (212) 222-7315; Email: bbenjamin@nysenate.gov

Notable Local Involvement: Senator Benjamin has opposed luxury over-development in our neighborhood and promoted affordable housing, youth development, and the rezoning of Morningside Heights. He has facilitated negotiations on Community Benefits Agreements initiated by MHCC

The Morningsider Quote: “COVID-19 has left our most vulnerable neighbors even more vulnerable,” says Senator Benjamin. “Many of us, including our senior population, are dealing with increasing levels of anxiety and depression brought on by social distancing and the accompanying economic recession. Already faced with a housing crisis and gentrification, the economic stress brought on by the pandemic has increased stress on our housing system and increased homelessness. This is a time for us to work together at heightened levels, to ensure that all of our neighbors feel seen and heard and have what they need to survive physically and emotionally.”

District 31

Elected Office Holder: Robert Jackson

Contact Information: Telephone: (212) 544-0173; Email: jackson@nysenate.gov

Notable Local Involvement: Senator Jackson has been a strong advocate for public safety, public education, and support for small businesses in Northern Manhattan.

Governor

The governor of New York is the head of state and head of government of the U.S. state of New York. The governor is the head of the executive branch of New York's state government and the commander-in-chief of the state's military forces. The governor has a duty to enforce state laws, and the power to either approve or veto bills passed by the New York State Legislature, to convene the legislature, and to grant pardons, except in cases of treason and impeachment. Unlike the other government departments that compose the executive branch of government, the governor is the head of the state Executive Department.

Elected Office Holder: Andrew Cuomo

Contact Information: Telephone: (518) 474-8390; Online [here](#).



Federal Offices

U.S. House of Representatives

The United States House of Representatives is the lower house of the United States Congress. The House is composed of representatives who sit in congressional districts allocated to each state on a basis of population as measured by the U.S. Census, with each district entitled to one representative. Since its inception in 1789, all representatives have been directly elected. The number of voting representatives is fixed by law at 435. In addition, there are currently six non-voting members. The House is charged with the passage of federal legislation. The House also has exclusive powers: It initiates all revenue bills, impeaches federal officers, and elects the president if no candidate receives a majority of votes in the Electoral College.

10th Congressional District

Elected Office Holder: Jerrold Nadler

Contact Information: Telephone: (212) 367-7350; Online [here](#).

Notable Local Involvement: Representative Nadler has been supportive of our neighborhood's Historic District designation.

13th Congressional District

Elected Office Holder: Adriano Espaillat

Contact Information: Telephone: (212) 663-3900; Online [here](#).

Notable Local Involvement: Representative Espaillat has introduced legislation to curb the impacts of gentrification in our district. He has also consistently supported veterans in Morningside Heights.

U.S. Senate

Each U.S. senator represents a single state in its entirety. Each state is equally represented by two senators who serve staggered terms of six years. There are currently 100 senators representing the 50 states. As the upper chamber of Congress, the Senate has several powers of advice and consent which are unique to it. These include the approval of treaties, and the confirmation of Cabinet secretaries, Supreme Court justices, federal judges, flag officers, regulatory officials, ambassadors, other federal executive officials and federal uniformed officers. If no candidate receives a majority of electors for vice president, the duty falls to the Senate to elect one of the top two recipients of electors for that office. The Senate conducts trials of those impeached by the House. The Senate president and presiding officer is the vice president of the United States. In the vice president's absence, the president pro tempore, who is traditionally the senior member of the party holding a majority of seats, presides over the Senate.

Senator Chuck Schumer:

Contact Information: Telephone: (212) 486-4430; Online [here](#).

Senator Kirsten Gillibrand

Contact Information: Telephone: (212) 688-6262; Online [here](#).



Though many members of our community are already familiar with the processes, norms, and personalities of these community and government offices, we hope it was helpful to simply list and describe them.

In light of the work that lies ahead in returning to some kind of normal in our shared public life, please consider this review an invitation to engage more fully in defining, protecting, and improving our great neighborhood.

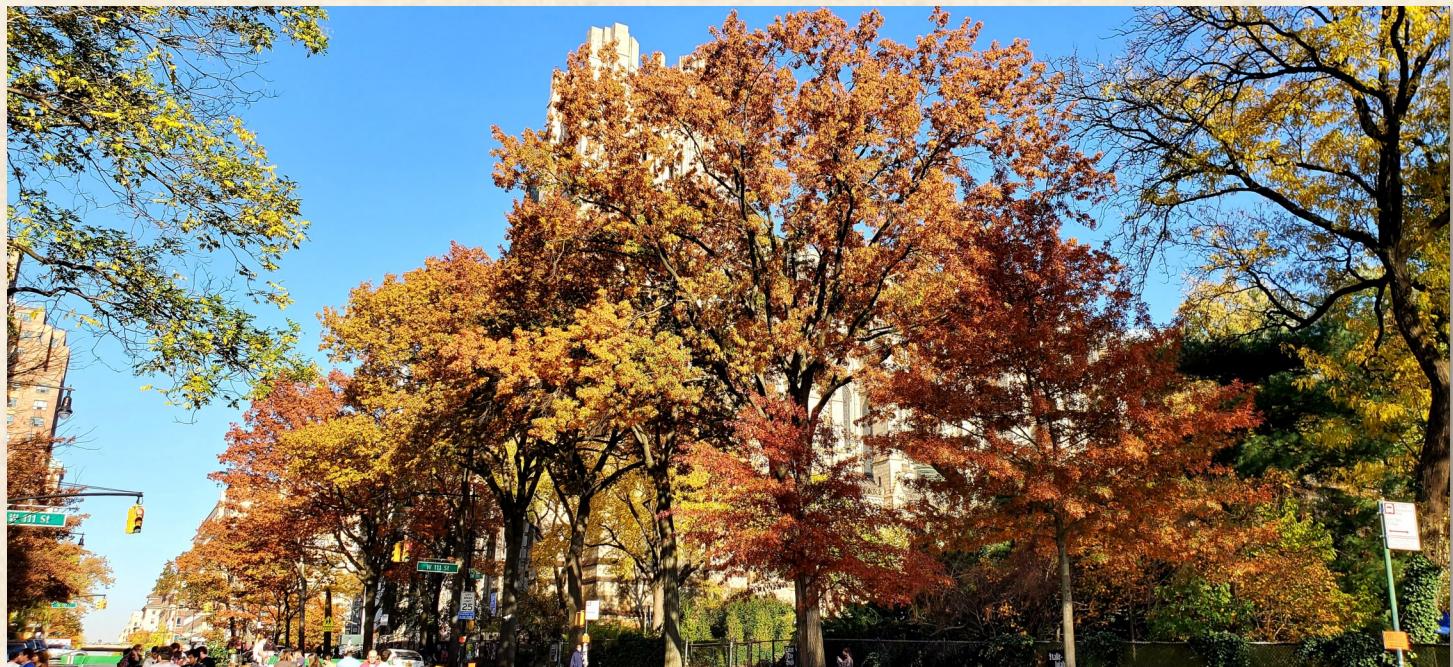
It all starts with knowing your audience.



News & Resources

Articles of Interest

- [Columbia Should Address Affordable Housing Crisis \(MHCC Op-Ed\), *Columbia Spectator*](#)
- [Save McGiffert Hall \(MHCC Op-Ed\), *Columbia Spectator*](#)
- [Indoor Dining in Morningside Heights: Restaurants Weigh In, *Columbia Spectator*](#)
- [PODCAST: Columbia's History of Community Relations and Real Estate Development \(MHCC included\), *Columbia Spectator*](#)
- [Developers Not Doing Enough \(MHCC Highlighted\), *Columbia Spectator*](#)
- [Fighting for Housing Justice at Columbia, *Columbia Spectator*](#)
- [Construction Workers at Columbia Demand Higher Wages, Benefits, *Columbia Spectator*](#)
- [COVID Impacts Columbia Housing and Demand for Apartments, *Columbia Spectator*](#)
- [Affordable Housing Challenges and Disparities Rise During COVID, *Columbia Spectator*](#)
- [Real Estate Developers Build Upscale Dorms \(Monarch Heights\), *New York Times*](#)



Local Support

As we've seen in the feature article, Morningside Heights is served by a variety of appointed and elected officials at the city and state levels. Please contact them with questions, concerns, and requests for assistance. Additional resources are listed [here](#).

Back-Page Diversion

Morningside Diary: Pre-Holiday Lessons

He appeared when he was most needed, an emissary from providence.

My neighbor saw a NextDoor post about a lost dog wandering around the Columbia campus. A woman had taken him in and asked if anyone knew the owner. Since no one did, my neighbor offered to foster the dog and I found myself wanting to help.

After a week, he became our block association's unofficial mascot. We got him back in shape, searched for his owner, and remembered what it was like to share our apartments. It turns out he was a great little guy.

Through a shelter on the East Side, we found out he'd been lost in 2016, as well. This gave us pause. (Was the owner capable of caring for him? What kind of person was he or she?) We started growing attached to the dog and tried different names on him: Eugene? Ben?

That's how it goes. Major developments occur when you're not expecting them and they come bearing lessons for those willing to explore.

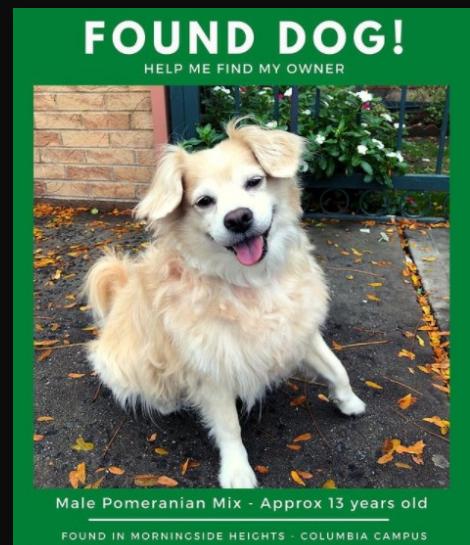
What did this dog, who appeared just after the election, have to impart? The first thought is clear: Everyone needs a home. After that, things become more nuanced: How does one define home? To what extent are other lives subject to scrutiny and intervention?

We settled on Ben. We finally got in touch with his owner and were disappointed to learn she wanted him back. Reluctantly, we worked out a plan and met her boyfriend on 110th & Columbus to hand him over.

Cheery to the end, Ben looked at the boyfriend and then back at us. It was a strange moment – a demarcation point during a rancorous season of debates, polling, protests, and more debates. As they began to walk south, it was like Ben had crossed a border, back into his own world. He had only been visiting; doing his own bit of exploring.

We said goodbye. Sadly. We turned to walk back up the hill and felt a bit more connected to each other and more aware of the city around us.

-a neighbor



Please submit your entries to *Morningside Diary* [here](#).