Explosions of color! Bursts of memorable sights and sounds! Joy-filled fun that erupts all day long!

The multichromatic kaleidoscope of memory-making stories that defines each visitor’s adventure at one of Cincinnati’s 100-plus parks and green spaces is the heart of the 2019 Hats Off Luncheon, returning to the John G. and Phyllis W. Smale Riverfront Park on Friday, May 10.

Co-chairs Carrie Carothers and Jennifer Buchholz will welcome to the event all those who have pledged to help sustain the Queen City’s award-winning park system, beginning with an 11 a.m. champagne cocktail reception followed by the presentation of the annual Phyllis W. Smale Award, and a gourmet luncheon on the Great Lawn. It promises to be an inspiring afternoon of positivity and park stories shared.

In an effort to help ensure Cincinnati Parks endure for the enjoyment of generations to come, the Women’s Committee of Smale Riverfront Park – a special committee of the Cincinnati Parks Foundation – created the Hats Off Luncheon, now in its 13th year, as a festive means of gathering women and men dedicated to raising needed funds for, as well as an awareness of, the city’s world-class park system. The initial goal of founding co-chairs Helen Heekin and Debbie Oliver was to find 100 women interested in donating $1,000 each to begin construction of Smale Riverfront Park. To their surprise and delight, 554 women contributed to the cause and the rest, as they say, is history.

“The creation of Smale Riverfront Park is one of the most important park projects in the past decade,” Buchholz notes. It transformed Cincinnati’s riverfront into a powerful gateway, fueling economic development, community health and engagement, commerce and tourism for the surrounding region.

The Hats Off Luncheon fundraiser started out with a few hundred women in attendance, growing to an outstanding annual attendance of 1,200.

“This will be the first time the luncheon is held on a Friday,” Carothers notes. “We’re excited to make this event one of Cincinnati’s great spring kick-offs of the year. One of the reasons we love this event so much is, it’s not just about celebrating our parks but elevating our city, making our city something to celebrate.”

“There are a lot of luncheons in the city that are fun and for a good cause,” she continues. “This one kicks it up a level because of the hats. You’re in a beautiful dress with a beautiful hat on a beautiful spring day in one of the most beautiful parks in the city – and you don’t want the fun to end after the luncheon. Everyone wants to keep their hats on a little longer; no one wants to stop socializing. So, this year, we’re having an after party at 21C.”

Both Carothers and Buchholz formerly served on the luncheon’s Décor Committee, and neither ever worry about inclement weather possibly dampening the spirit of the Hats Off Luncheon. If it rains, people just put on their rain boots with their hats and good clothes and have a good time, they note.

Of course, an event of this magnitude doesn’t materialize overnight. It takes more than 100 volunteers and the better part of a year. “Everyone is just so happy to be a part of it,” Carothers adds. “It’s been so much fun for us – no one looks at this as obligation. We’ve truly enjoyed coordinating this year’s event.”

This year’s Hats Off Luncheon theme?

“It’s hard to put into words – it’s not so much a theme as a feeling we want to convey,” she explains. “We’re celebrating positivity, bright colors and fun. We want people to really see that our parks aren’t just about green, but a rainbow of colors, and how they pop up in various ways throughout the parks, and how those colors make people feel.”

The luncheon’s colorful 120 floral table centerpieces and other vivid décor made by the Women’s Committee members’ creative hands are the result of the usual philanthropic “recipe,” if you will – one-part elbow grease and one-part magic.

“Any organization can take $100,000 and plan an amazing, incredible event, but a non-profit basically is creating something out of nothing. We want to ‘WOW’ people and show them what we can accomplish within our committee,” Buchholz adds. “You have no idea
how many creative, talented women not only live in Cincinnati but are volunteering their time for Cincinnati’s parks.”

Parks Are For Everyone
Cincinnati’s 130 parks and green spaces are for everyone, and the mission of the Cincinnati Parks Foundation – the primary philanthropic partner to Cincinnati Parks – is to raise the funds necessary to ensure those special areas remain beautiful, accessible and fun for generations to come.

“Carrie and Jen have chaired the Hats Off Luncheon’s Décor Committee for several years, and I am delighted they agreed to step up and chair this year’s event,” says Cincinnati Parks Foundation Executive Director Jennifer Spieser. “Our fundraising goal this year is $500,000, which will allow us to apply revenue to many different projects. Our mission at the Foundation is to help conserve and enhance all of the city’s parks and green spaces.”

Spieser describes The Women’s Committee as “a group of fierce, dedicated and passionate volunteers.”

“Cincinnati’s parks total 5,000 acres, make up 10 percent of the city’s land mass, and they are also referred to as a city built within a park system. That’s how green it is, and how special it is that we have this in our city. Cincinnati Parks was recently rated as one of the Top 7 Urban Park Systems in the county by the Trust for Public Land.”

But like so many other municipalities throughout the country, funding for parks and recreation has been reduced over the years, affecting budgets and making alternative revenue sources imperative if park maintenance and enhancement are to continue.

“The Cincinnati Parks Foundation, since it was established 24 years ago, has raised over $100 million,” Spieser says. “A large part of that, of course, was for the design and development of Smale Riverfront Park, but the Foundation has also accomplished some cool projects at Mt. Airy Forrest — the city’s largest park with 1,459 acres — on the city’s west side, Eden Park, French Park and Alms Park. Our goal is to make our parks more accessible to everyone.”

The Foundation is currently dedicated to finding funds to be earmarked for a total of eight “geographically diverse” park projects, gleaned from the Cincinnati Parks 2007 Master Plan, to be completed over the next three years. Per the Foundation’s proposal, money raised will go toward a new playground for Inwood Park and a variety of enhancements at Bellevue Park, Fairview Park, Burnet Woods, Mt. Storm Park, Mt. Airy Forest, Hyde Park Square and Laurel Park.

“I don’t know anywhere else in the country where there’s an organization like the Women’s Committee that puts on an event the magnitude of the Hats Off Luncheon,” says Cincinnati Parks Director Wade Walcutt. “I’ve been involved in public parks my entire career, and I have been fortunate to be part of a lot of great organizations in Ohio and in North Carolina, and this is a first — to see an organization with this kind of leadership, number one; and number two, a Foundation this size dedicated to supporting and enhancing public parks.”

“And then you couple all that with the entire 290,000 people living in the city of Cincinnati. That kind of support is really humbling in the career I am involved in, that I have a passion for. It’s a beautiful thing.”

Thanks to the combined effort, excitement and engagement continuously exerted by the Cincinnati Parks Foundation, the Women’s Committee of Smale Riverfront Park, the Cincinnati Board of Park Commissioners and the city’s 200 full-time park staff, the park system is ever moving forward toward a bright future, Walcutt observes.

“What we say is, ‘Cincinnati Parks CARES.’ We care in the literal sense, in that everything we do, every person in every role — whether they’re cutting grass, picking up litter, or doing park design — touches on our five pillars,” he says. “We create economic impacts for the city; we advance conservation; we rejuvenate people’s health, both mental and physical; and we enhance quality of life, all under the umbrella of social equity. Those are all the things we do as an organization, and if we do all those things, we know we’re impacting people’s lives.”

“We have more than a million visitors to all of our parks every year. That’s a lot of lives we impact. Lives that we’ll never meet. Generations we’ll never know. But by doing what we do, we know we’re building a better Cincinnati.”
If you grew up in Cincinnati, it’s likely your perception of Mill Creek was that it was awful, certainly not somewhere you wanted to go to fish or revel in nature’s beauty. In fact, in 1997, Mill Creek was named the most endangered urban stream in North America.

Well, “awful” is changing to “awesome” thanks to the Mill Creek Alliance (MCA), a non-profit organization formed in 2018 through the merger of two renowned area conservation groups – The Mill Creek Watershed Council of Communities and Groundwork Cincinnati-Mill Creek. The Alliance’s mission? To empower the more than three dozen Mill Creek constituent communities to protect and enhance the value of the Mill Creek, its tributaries and watershed, thereby enhancing the area’s quality of life.

The Cincinnati Parks Foundation, in recognition of the MCA’s creative community collaboration in its continuing commitment to transforming the Mill Creek into a healthy ecosystem along which people can live, work and play, will present the Mill Creek Alliance with the 2019 Phyllis W. Smale Award during the Hats Off Luncheon on Friday, May 10, at the John G. & Phyllis W. Smale Riverfront Park.

“At P&G, we have a long history of environmental stewardship, and we are inspired when we see individuals making the world a better place,” says David Taylor, Chairman of the Board, President and CEO of Procter & Gamble, the award presenting sponsor. “The Phyllis Smale award recognizes those who make a meaningful difference in our community, and we are proud to partner with the Smale Family and the Cincinnati Parks Foundation to celebrate the work of the Mill Creek Alliance as this year’s recipient.”

“The Mill Creek is the second most important body of water for the City of Cincinnati, the Ohio River being the first,” says Chris Caldemeyer, an MCA volunteer, avid fisherman and Phyllis’ grandson, who nominated the MCA for the award. “More people live, work and play near the Mill Creek than any other waterway in the area. The Mill Creek is still alive, thanks mostly to the MCA and its predecessors. The MCA, working on a shoestring budget, coalesced around a grassroots and city-wide will to do better. The MCA is what happens when good people want to do good for their community. That’s what the MCA is about – improving the communities and lives affected by the Mill Creek.”

Over the past 20 years, Mill Creek’s water quality has vastly improved – the fish population and diversity have exploded, people now enjoy fly fishing on Mill Creek, and endangered birds like the Rock Night Herron and ospreys have returned, to name but a few positive changes.

“It is an absolutely tremendous honor to be recognized with the Phyllis W. Smale Award,” says David Schmitt, MCA executive director. “To me, it feels like a recognition of the merger itself. The Mill Creek Watershed Council of Communities and Groundwork Cincinnati-Mill Creek have been in existence since the mid-90s, both doing great things. Last summer’s merger allows us to bring all the strengths of both organizations together.”

PAST HONOREES
Phyllis W. Smale Award

2018  Jay Andrress
2017  Marian J. Lindberg
2016  Cincinnati Park Board
2015  3CDC
2014  Brewster Rhoads
2013  PNC Bank
2012  Cathy Moon
2011  Anne M. Zaring
2010  Marjorie Motch
2009  Elizabeth Asbury Stone
2008  Marjorie H. Rauh
2007  Phyllis W. Smale

Phyllis W. Smale, Circa 1980

Making the World a Better Place

Local children enjoying outdoor adventure along the Mill Creek.

David Schmitt
Executive Director of Mill Creek Alliance