



September 2015 Sustainability Hero Dorothy Rasmussen, Borough of Metuchen Councilwoman and Green Team Liaison

Dorothy Rasmussen is well-known for her resolve and unwavering commitment to hope as she works to make Metuchen a greener and better borough. "I'm a persistent person. I feel a sense of urgency for the future. I know what needs to get done and I'm working hard with the support of my community and the green team to move projects forward. This is very important to me," said Dorothy.

Metuchen, located in Middlesex County, has a population of about 13,600. It's a walkable, compact borough, surrounded by the Township of Edison and traversed by Route 27, and the Northeast Corridor train line, with one of the line's busiest stations.

As a Metuchen Borough Councilwoman, Dorothy serves as the liaison to the green team. Under her leadership, Metuchen Borough achieved Sustainable Jersey bronze certification in 2014 and the Metuchen schools are now getting involved in the [Sustainable Jersey for Schools](#) program. Currently the Metuchen School District, its elementary school, middle school and the high school are registered and working toward certification. Dorothy is tireless in her pursuit to put Metuchen on the path to sustainability. She does not do things casually; if she is in, she is all in. Known amongst friends as the 'queen of walking,' Dorothy will spend time walking through neighborhoods, the downtown and an occasional block party to talk to Metuchen residents and listen to their concerns and ideas to make the community better.



Bay Ridge, Brooklyn to Metuchen Borough

Dorothy grew up in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. A born leader, she is oldest of five children from a loving, industrious family of Irish and Italian heritage. Her parents, Maureen and Anthony Ungaro, taught her the value of hard work and the importance of volunteering and giving back to the community. Dorothy faced loss at an early age when her brother Michael died in an accident. The support of the community and strength of her parents during this time was something she said she will never forget.

Dorothy has always excelled in science; she won a high school science award for her experiment that tested the effect of protein synthesis on memory loss using goldfish that she trained to perform a specific task. With a personal goal of attending the private Catholic High School, she needed to get a job to contribute to the yearly tuition cost of \$300. Dorothy worked at Chicken Delight making \$1.65/hour. As a high school senior, she got her dream job at the Hayden Planetarium. She proudly recalled the time she arranged for her high school advanced placement biology class to take a field trip to the Planetarium and provided a special tour.

Dorothy graduated from the College of Staten Island with a BS in Medical Technology (BSMT). While in college she took an environmental health science class that required her to write a lengthy Environmental Impact Statement. Learning about the different environmental impact areas was her first brush with the many ways that the environment is affected by projects and growth.

In the late 1980s, Dorothy left New York and moved to Metuchen Borough in New Jersey. She has worked for the past 30 years as a medical technologist at JFK Medical Center in Edison. Dorothy's entrée into local politics began when she attended a Shade Tree Commission meeting to inquire about getting trees planted at her home in Metuchen to replace ones removed when curbs were installed on her street. Her presentation and knowledge of trees, including the use of their Latin names, must have impressed the committee. After the meeting, she was asked to join the commission.

She served two years on the commission and was asked by the mayor to run for borough council. Dorothy was elected to council in both 2011 and 2014 serving as the council liaison to the Chamber of Commerce, the Development Commission, the Environmental Commission, the Green Team and the Shade Tree Commission. She is former liaison to

Youth Services Board/Municipal Alliance. She is the chair of the Dismal Swamp Preservation Commission and a member of Middlesex County Federation of Democratic Women and the Borough Improvement League.

Sustainable Jersey Certified Metuchen Borough

As the council liaison to the Environmental Commission, Dorothy said that she spent the first two years coming up to speed on issues like energy efficiency and climate change. "I attended every meeting, listening and learning. By the time Sustainable Jersey certification was proposed, I knew it would be difficult, but that Metuchen could accomplish it," added Dorothy. She did her homework reviewing all of the on-line certification reports from the certified towns and taking time to speak with local experts like Caroline Ehrlich, chief of staff from five-time Sustainable Jersey-Sustainability Champion, Woodbridge Township.



In 2014, Metuchen Borough achieved certification, earning 195 points in 17 categories: 1) Create Green Team, 2) Buy Fresh, Buy Local Program, 3) Farmers Market, 4) Building Healthier Communities, 5) Dismal Swamp Project, 6) Pedestrian Crosswalk Safety Flags, 7) Complete Streets Program, 8) Sustainable Land Use Pledge, 9) Environmental Commission, 10) Tree Protection Ordinance, 11) Community Forestry Plan and Tree Cover Goal, 12) Tree Hazard Inventory, 13) Tree Maintenance Program, 14) Tree Planting Program, 15) Prescription Drug Safety and Disposal, 16) Community Paper Shredding Day and 17) Recycling Depot. You can read about each of these actions in the [Metuchen Borough Certification Report](#).

The Technicolor Metuchen Green Team

The Metuchen Green Team meets monthly and was originally led by members of the Environmental and Shade Tree commissions. Recently, the green team was strengthened through the addition of new members. Dorothy said, "Like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, things were black and white when I was first working with a small group to do all of the actions for certification. But then I realized that there are so many other community members who can help and contribute to the Borough's sustainability efforts. Since we've broadened the green team, the world is now in Technicolor." The green team has added the Borough Administrator, members of [Bike-Walk Metuchen](#), the [Metuchen Farmers' Market](#) Committee, [Pesticide Free Metuchen](#), and other individuals from the community. Dorothy had high praise for Borough Administrator, Jennifer Maier, whom she described as very knowledgeable about sustainability issues and a great supporter.

Dorothy enjoys being outside and getting her hands dirty. She spent Earth Day pulling carpets and trash from the Middlesex Greenway as part of a clean-up. Dorothy participates in "walkabouts" with the Shade Tree Commission to evaluate maintenance needs of recently planted trees. She can occasionally be seen driving with a car full of tree branches that the Shade Tree Commission has removed from young borough trees during one of the walkabouts. She admitted that she is a bit of a micro-manager as she recounted how she personally picks out the borough's new trees to make sure they are healthy and the sustainable. She staples her business card to the tree tag to assure that the trees she picks out are the ones delivered.

Grass: Cut It and Leave It

Dorothy helped implement the "cut it and leave it" program which asks residents to mulch their grass instead of putting it out to the curb in order to reduce tonnage brought to the landfill. Grass clippings provide a natural and healthy fertilizer for a growing lawn. By cutting lawns short and removing the clippings, residents rob their lawns of their own natural fertilizers and create waste that must be hauled away for disposal or recycling by a truck. An educational forum was presented by Rutgers Cooperative Extension to inform residents of the benefits of this action. Dorothy said, "I replaced my lawnmower and leaf blower with electric and human operated equipment. And my lawn has definitely benefited from leaving my grass clippings." Dorothy advocated for a wide use of composting by organizing

demonstrations at the local farmers' market and Country Fair. Borough Administrator, Jennifer Maier, applied for a grant to bulk purchase composters for distribution to interested residents.

Dismal Swamp

Dorothy was appointed by Mayor Vahalla to the Dismal Swamp Preservation Commission in 2012 and was elected as chair in 2013. Dismal Swamp covers nearly 650 acres and is a wetlands ecosystem. She has been a motivator on this commission, established in 2009, that has two representatives from Metuchen, Edison and South Plainfield and a representative from Edison Wetlands Association, and two Middlesex County elected officials. The purpose of the commission is one of planning and preservation of the Dismal Swamp and its many animal species. Dorothy said, "my vision for Dismal Swap are recreational facilities that preserve the area while allowing busy families to get away without going far away. To allow them to spend time together as a family while participating in activities to promote health and wellness such as hiking, kayaking, camping and educational activities like bird watching."



Bike and Pedestrian Safety Take on New Urgency

Bike and pedestrian safety have always been a priority for Dorothy. As part of the Sustainable Jersey certification application, Metuchen received points for an innovative Pedestrian Crosswalk Safety Flags program and adoption of a Complete Streets resolution. Metuchen was the first municipality in New Jersey to implement the Pedestrian Crosswalk Safety Flag program which provides bright flags at select crosswalks that pedestrians can carry across the street while they are crossing.

Dorothy said, "one of the most important issues facing Metuchen is keeping residents safe on our crowded streets. Cars and traffic are a fact of life in my area. I support pedestrian safety programs through traffic enforcement, more visible crosswalks and programs like Complete Streets. The goal is to make Metuchen safer for residents and visitors."

These issues took on a new level of urgency for Dorothy this summer. On July 5, 2015, Dorothy's 31 year old son, Roman, was struck by a car while riding his bicycle. He suffered multiple broken bones, fractures and internal injuries as a result. Police are trying to find the hit-and-run driver. Roman, who is now in a rehabilitation facility, is a gifted musician and artist. Funds to help Roman are being gathered by the Borough Improvement League of Metuchen, a 501c3 tax-exempt charity. The funds will be distributed towards medical and rehabilitation needs not covered by insurance. Checks can be made out to the "BIL" or "Borough Improvement League" with the name Roman Stefaniw in the check subject line and mailed to PO Box 174, Metuchen, NJ 08840. To make an on-line donation visit: [Romans Got This](#). Dorothy is thankful for the community's support, "I always knew that Metuchen was a close-knit community, and I always knew they came out to help those in need," she said. "I am grateful to live in a place where everyone treats you like family."

Good Friends, Family, Food and Bruder the Shih-Tzu

Dorothy is thankful for her two sons, Roman mentioned above and James who is 23 years old. Like Roman, she describes James as a man of many talents, noting that he is a gifted athlete and an advocate for the underdog. In addition to spending time with her family, Dorothy likes to go out with friends. She describes herself as a 'foodie' and enjoys visiting local restaurants. She loves to garden and attends cultural events like the theater and the opera. Dorothy is a longtime member of St. Francis Cathedral parish. In addition to friends and family, Dorothy said she serves as a 'personal assistant' to her dog Bruder, the Shih-Tzu.

If you need inspiration, we recommend you spend some time with Dorothy who will definitely get you out of your chair and right to work making a difference in your community. Dorothy will be speaking on one of the Sustainable Jersey panels at the New Jersey League of Municipalities Convention this November 2015. The panel, entitled "What Does Sustainability Look Like In Urban, Suburban, And Rural Municipalities," will take place on Wednesday, November 18 in Atlantic City: [more info](#).