

JULY 2016 SUSTAINABILITY HERO



MEISHKA L. MITCHELL, AICP, PP Vice President of Neighborhood Initiatives Cooper's Ferry Partnership

For more than 13 years, Meishka Mitchell has championed sustainable planning and revitalization in the City of Camden while establishing herself as a leader in the community, equally respected by government officials, community partners and city residents. Drawing on her background as a Camden native, as well as her education and experience, she brings a keen and unique perspective to her work in community planning and neighborhood revitalization.

Working with the community and through her numerous presentations across the state and country, Meishka shares her vision. She explained “The urban environment is often undervalued in the sustainability movement. It’s natural to focus on the protection of pristine environments, but the urban environment is an incredibly important resource. We have bald eagles in Camden and an amazing diversity of plant and animal species around the old Harrison Avenue Landfill.” She added, “I try to show how the urban environment is connected, the resources and the impacts. Sewage overflows in Camden do not stop at the Camden border. Factories that pollute the air do not just effect asthma rates in Camden. Until we understand how we are all interconnected and work together, we cannot make progress toward a more sustainable world.”

Cooper's Ferry Partnership: Meishka joined the [Cooper's Ferry Partnership](#) staff as a graduate intern in 2003 and took the helm as the Vice President of Neighborhood Initiatives in 2010. Cooper's Ferry Partnership is a private, non-profit corporation that works with community development corporations in the City of Camden to provide technical assistance on a wide range of revitalization projects.



She has played a key role in broadening the organization's mission to address planning and redevelopment efforts in Camden's neighborhoods, overseeing the development of plans and implementation of key neighborhood projects with a high level of community input and participation. Meishka helps with the implementation of numerous infrastructure and park improvement projects, and is instrumental in Camden's innovative sustainability and placemaking initiatives. She has worked with the City of Camden in the development of stormwater management and environmental policy on the citywide level. The staff at Cooper's Ferry Partnership was instrumental in assisting the City of Camden achieve silver-level certification with the Sustainable Jersey program in 2013, you can read the [City of Camden's Certification Report](#).

Cooper's Ferry Partnership is working to improve, preserve and maintain existing green spaces while also developing new parks and green space in Camden. Meishka has worked on multiple projects that re-use public spaces to make communities more “walkable” and active. These projects give people usable space to gather, walk or play, and include such spaces as the KaBoom playground in Camden's Northgate Park which, in partnership with the YMCA of Burlington

and Camden Counties' team, Meishka co-led to its completion. "Giving Camden's children the opportunity to be active today, assures them a future where they have the opportunity to achieve their full health potential," she said.

Urban challenges managed with a "collective impact" approach through the Camden Smart Initiative:

Meishka is a founding participant in a partnership that the City of Camden developed called the [Camden SMART](#) (Stormwater Management and Resource Training) Initiative. It is a community-driven movement to protect human health, improve conditions for economic development, improve water quality and enhance the quality of life for Camden City, its residents and the Delaware River watershed through the broad use of green and grey infrastructure techniques for stormwater management.



The group was founded in 2011 by a coalition of six entities: Cooper's Ferry Partnership, the City of Camden, Camden County Municipal Utilities Authority, Rutgers Cooperative Extension Water Resources Program, New Jersey Tree Foundation and the NJ Department of Environmental Protection.

Meishka said, "When I was first working with the community, I was told again and again by residents that a priority community issue was the need to fix flooding. It's a public health crisis that degrades quality of life and negatively impacts the City's economic viability and environmental quality." She added, "Infrastructure planning is linked to environmental issues. I work with the community on water infrastructure, air quality and brownfields, so sustainability is a key focus. The challenge is addressing these complex problems with limited resources. We understood that we had to think differently to solve these challenges. The Camden SMART initiative has helped us do this."

Camden SMART has had impressive results; it has constructed a total of 49 green infrastructure projects, which capture, treat and infiltrate over 60 million gallons of stormwater each year that would otherwise contribute to overflows of the combined sewer system into Camden's streets, parks, homes and waterways. SMART has also distributed 223 rain barrels to Camden residents, planted 1,458 trees, engaged 4,000 community members, hosted 33 sustainability events and workshops and collaborated with more than 40 project partners in the development of green infrastructure projects and programs.



Sustainability Site Plan Ordinance: In 2015, Meishka was part of a group that helped the City of Camden write and pass New Jersey's first Sustainability Site Plan Ordinance, which is one of just a handful of sustainability ordinances that address environmental justice and cumulative impacts passed across the whole country. The [Ordinance Adopting Sustainability Requirements for the City of Camden](#) requires that applicants coming to Camden to propose a new development must submit an Environmental Impact and Benefits Assessment (EIBA) that evaluates and addresses the potential impacts and potential benefits that the development activity could have on the environment and the public health and general welfare of residents of the City of Camden. A strength of this ordinance is that it considers the

cumulative impact, taking into consideration what's already there. Meishka uses this ordinance as she works on new development projects. Work on the ordinance and the Natural Resources Inventory was supported by a \$20,000 [Sustainable Jersey Small Grant](#) that the Camden Green Team applied for and received.

Awards, honors and affiliations: Meishka's long list of awards and honors are a good indication of the contribution she is making in the community. In 2016 she received the United Way of Greater Philadelphia & Southern NJ-Stephen C. Ries Community Advocate Award. In 2014, she received a Healthy Kids Champion Award from the New Partnership for Healthy Kids. Meishka was recognized with a Camden County Sustainability Champion Award from the Camden County Board of Freeholders. She was named the Distinguished Young Planner of the Year by the American Planning Association-NJ Chapter and received a Woman of Purpose Award from Camden Mayor Dana L. Redd. She has a Certificate of Special Congressional Recognition from U.S. Congressman Robert Andrews, a State of New Jersey Joint Legislative Commendation Woman of Purpose award, a City Council of Camden Woman of Purpose Award and the African American Woman Achiever award from the Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity.



Meishka has her New Jersey professional planner license and is a member of the American Institute of Certified Planners, the Urban Land Institute and the American Planning Association. She is a graduate of the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation Class of 2013 Emerging Leaders Program and is in the 2016 class of the Lead NJ program. She has served on many boards including the Housing Authority of the City of Camden, Settlement Music School-Camden Branch and the YMCA of Burlington and Camden Counties. Meishka also volunteers with the Big Brothers Big Sisters program.

Education that led to her current position: Meishka graduated from Camden High School and after securing a scholarship, she decided to go to William Paterson University in Wayne, New Jersey, where she received a BA in Political Science. Meishka said, "I enjoyed my time at William Paterson. Having not traveled out of Camden very much as a kid, I went from a high school where the total minority enrollment is 99 percent to a college that had maybe 10 percent minority students. I experienced demographics that were closer to the rest of the country." Meishka next secured a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Community Development Fellowship and attended the University of Pennsylvania where she received a Masters of City and Regional Planning that prepared her for the work she does today. She is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Public Affairs and Community Development at Rutgers University.

What you may not know about Meishka: Meishka grew up in a single-parent household in Camden with her mother and younger sister Chantal. Education and a strong work ethic were foundational values. She said, "I understood that bringing home good grades was expected of me. We did not have a lot of money, but we were hard working and resourceful. I also learned the importance of kindness from my mother and grandmother."

Meishka enjoys spending time with her children and husband, the Honorable Morris G. Smith J.S.C. She has two stepchildren named Caryn and Morris, who are in college at Rutgers University-New Brunswick and Georgia Institute of Technology. Her two younger children keep them busy full time. Her daughter Marley is nine, athletic and has her sights set on the Olympics competing in softball, basketball or track. Her son Miles is seven and an entertainer; he recently wowed them with a talent show appearance. Meishka likes to travel and attend church on Sunday. She is actively involved at the First Nazarene Baptist Church in Camden. She enjoys reading and writing. We look forward to her first publication!