

First, let me say a big “howdy to y’ all” and thank you for joining us this evening—it is, indeed, time to kick-up our heels, look back and celebrate MCF’s 40 phenomenal years.

Your presence here tonight and, your generous support throughout the year, means so much. Most important, it means we can carry on the remarkable legacy of two people who are so very special to us all—the late Michael Huber and Judith Stanley Coleman—our founders and the honorees of this spectacular evening.

In 1977 when Michael and Judy founded MCF, they had a vision for Monmouth County and it has been my greatest honor to work in partnership with so many wonderful people and organizations to carry it forward. As trailblazers, they truly paved the way and we are simply walking down their path. You must remember that 40 years ago, while the national conversation about the environment was just beginning, Michael and Judy were already talking about the preservation of open space, farms, wildlife, rivers and what the future might hold for Monmouth County. They understood what was at stake and invited us all to join in and speak out.

As Sam Huber, Michael’s son, has said “My father loved wild places and all the many pleasures they afforded. He understood the pressures that would lead to the development of prime farmland and natural areas that gave the Garden State its name. It was his vision to preserve this natural beauty.”

So, here we stand today with so much accomplished. Working collaboratively, MCF has helped to save and preserve 22,500 acres of open space and farmland. And, we are recognized as the only land trust in all of Monmouth County. While we continue to focus unwaveringly on the preservation of farms, open space and wildlife, we have also broadened our scope with a new commitment to help underserved urban communities. The opening of Springwood Avenue Park in Asbury Park in June 2016 marked the first of these projects, offering green space, playgrounds, a walking trail, and amphitheater—a gathering place where nature and neighbors can mix and mingle. Given this great success, plans are now underway for the development of Sunset Park in Red Bank.

I must admit, it takes a lot to make this all work—time, expertise, relationships—sometimes an exemplary sense of humor--and, of course, funding. As you all may know, the residents of Monmouth County will be voting on the Open Space Trust Referendum this coming November. If passed, it would cost the average household about an extra \$56 a year. In some ways, it's small price to pay for all the big things it will help to achieve—namely, it will enable the Monmouth County Park System, our close partner in several projects, to continue preserving land that is regionally significant, as well as create a county-wide open space system. True, this incremental increase means there's a little less in my martini fund each month; for others, it might come down to few less pizzas and beer—whatever your pleasure might be. But, keep in mind, it is important for us, our children and every generation that follows, so I hope you will vote “yes.”

So, with that piece of business aside, I want to thank all the wonderful people who gave of themselves and worked so tirelessly to make tonight happen. Of course, our deepest gratitude to Artie K for hosting us at Fairway—a magnificent piece of land MCF helped to preserve. And to everyone on the Dinner Dance Committee—especially Kathy Ketchum and Heather Helela—whose incredible talents transformed it into the do-si-doing saloon it is this evening. Our interns and staff—Kelly Kenney, Jenna Cosimo and Bennett Moss—I'm not sure how anything would ever happen without you. And, a huge thank you to Lisa McKean who must have waived her magic wand to make this the perfect evening. . .and so much fun.

Most of all, I want to raise a glass and say thank you to Michael and Judy for standing up for what they believed in and for what they started 40 years ago. Our work at MCF continues and I know they would be proud. Cheers!