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Our Town: MidtownPhilanthropic society gets things done

By H.M. Cauley

For the AJC

Almost hidden among the glassy highrises and office towers of Midtown, one of the last vestiges of Atlanta's residential past still stands. The Wimbish house on Peachtree Street just south of Colony Square has been dwarfed by its contemporary neighbors, but in 1906, it was one of many posh family homes along what was known as the town's swanky "Mansion Row."

As if a single-family home still standing in that high-rent district wasn't already an oddity, its owners are even more unusual. They are the 80 members of one the long-standing, very active and influential Atlanta Woman's Club, an organization that bought the property (and much of what stood around it) in 1919.

When it was founded in 1895, a woman's philanthropic society was an ideal way to combine civic and charitable work with a social life. The organization has put its stamp on the city, promoting causes that created, among others, Grady Hospital, the airport and the Auburn Curb Market. When the club took over the Wimbish House in 1919, it added a 200-seat auditorium and a ballroom to host a variety of events - which it continues to do to this day.

"Sometimes I think almost everybody in the world has been in this house," said Sandy Springs resident Karen Clydesdale, the current club president who joined in 2007. "Yet we are one of the city's best-kept secrets. And we're really not so happy about being a secret."

In its heyday, the club boasted more than 1,000 members, but as contemporary women went back to school and work, fewer had time to attend the 11:15 a.m. meetings on the second Monday of each month. (The group recently started meeting in the evening at least once a quarter.) To join, women need only attend two meetings, support the club's mission of outreach and pay \$50 in annual dues.

"We are nonsectarian, nondenominational women of all ages and races," said Clydesdale. "But I have two daughters in their late 30s who say they don't need a woman's organization to get something done. I believe there is strength in numbers, and women's groups are coming more to the forefront as people see that they can accomplish more as a group than an individual."

The club supports a variety of local, state, national and international causes, largely connected to women and children's issues. One advantage the club has its valuable real estate and the income it generates from rentals.

"Unlike a lot of other clubs, we have seed money from owning this home for so many years," said Clydesdale. "And we thank goodness every day that the ladies of 1919 made that decision to purchase it."

Take the Tour

At 3 p.m. March 11 and 18, club members attired in an array of period costumes will open their doors to the public as part of the "Phoenix Flies" celebration of the city's historic sites. The tour is free, but reservations are required: 404-870-8833.

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www.atlwc.org