AWBURY
ARBORETUM

Dear Friends,

With great sadness we announce the passing of Christopher R. van de Velde, who served as General Manager at Awbury Arboretum from 2011-2021, and Project Manager from 2021-2026. Chris passed away on October 6th, 2026 at the age of 85.

The impact Chris made at Awbury has been nothing short of profound, and his legacy is permanently woven into the fabric of this precious place. In his leadership, Chris overcame pressing challenges, successfully rebuilding and stabilizing operations, invigorating programs and strengthening infrastructure. He set the Arboretum on a course of long-term growth previously unimagined.

A member of the so-called "silent generation", Chris was born at a time of global upheaval. In 1941 in Hawaii, he was a 6-month-old infant living with his parents on the Naval Base at Pearl Harbor when the bombs rained down on that infamous December day. By the time he entered college the hot war was over and the Cold War had taken its place. Chris graduated from McPherson College (Kansas) in 1964 with a BA in history and secured a job with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in Philadelphia. From there, he landed a position under Mayor John Lindsay in the New York City Department of Housing and Urban Development–a rare opportunity for a young graduate.

Although New York claimed him for some time, Chris never got Philly out of his system. In the 1970s, he returned to join several friends in a private urban renewal project: Franklin Town. This time, Philadelphia was to become his home. Chris settled with his wife Lee in West Mt. Airy, where they spent 35 years raising their blended family. They were active participants in local civic life, contributing to the founding of Weavers Way Co-op, taking on leadership roles at West Mt. Airy Neighbors, and more. Beyond serving as Vice President and Secretary of The Franklin Town Corporation, Chris held a number of senior leadership positions over the span of his professional life, including as President of The Chester City Development Office, head of The Delaware County Economic Development Center, Manager for The Borough of Yeadon, Senior Executive Officer of the Philadelphia Gas Works, Director of Real Estate for the University of Pennsylvania, and Manager for Whitemarsh Township. He earned his Master's degree in Governmental Administration from the Fels Institute of Government at the University of Pennsylvania in 1995.

Chris first got involved with Awbury in the 1980s. At that time, he was asked to join the Board of the City Parks Association (CPA), an entity chartered in 1888 that is the legal owner of Awbury Arboretum (and not a branch of county or municipal government). In his own words, ...in the late 1980s...I had the good fortune to meet Gay [Johnson] and a band of Awbury neighbors with a vision. Gay and her fellow neighbors were not satisfied with the Arboretum's management...The group formed the Awbury Arboretum Association and asked if they could be given a contract to turn Awbury into a vibrant physical and programmatic community asset.

At the time, I was Board Chair of the City Parks Association…I was impressed with the vision and sense of purpose presented by Gay and her fellow volunteers, and while it was a difficult decision, we did finally agree to gamble [that forming] the Awbury Arboretum Association would be successful…" In 2010, Chris was on the threshold of retirement. At that time, the world was still reeling from the 2008 financial crisis, and Awbury had been hard-hit by a loss of state funding for essential programs and operations. Friends on the Board of the Awbury Arboretum Association called on Chris for guidance. When the scope of the need became apparent, Chris offered to step into the role of General Manager for the grand sum of $1 per year. And so it was, for nearly a decade.

Chris was bold and tenacious in his quest to "right the ship" and proceeded to set the organization on a new upward trajectory. He built a strong team and welcomed innovative ideas. Self-effacing on the topic of horticulture, he often quipped that he knew nothing about running an arboretum but got "lucky" with the creativity and talent of the people he was fortunate enough to recruit and work beside. In 2013, he orchestrated the establishment of the Arboretum's Education Center. The structure was donated by a small local private school upon its closure, and precipitated a boom in agricultural activity on what has become known as "The Farm at Awbury." The "Ed Center" is now a fixture, a well-worn and essential facility, serving members of a dynamic agricultural village, and many others beyond.

In 2016, Chris successfully steered the sale of a conservation easement to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, protecting 38 acres of the Arboretum's landscape from development in perpetuity, and with the proceeds, tripling the Arboretum's meager endowment.

In 2017, more projects were realized, including an important expansion for the Awbury Community Garden Club, the addition of a storage barn near the Cope House, the creation of a bluestone patio and the installation of permanent accommodations for a large-capacity seasonal event tent.

In late 2019, Chris spearheaded the acquisition of a historically important carriage house, adding yet further to the Arboretum's growing facilities portfolio.

And, in 2021, despite all the difficult consequences of the pandemic, Chris drove the restoration of the Arboretum's historic lower pond and its watercourse to completion – a critical but complex project that had died on the vine decades earlier.

Chris' legacy lives on in the many physical and operational improvements he brought to bear at Awbury, and will be held especially close by all those whose lives he inspired as a beloved leader, mentor, generous supporter and ardent advocate for the Arboretum. His steady, unyielding presence carried the organization safely through uncertain times and opened up whole new vistas. Here are just a few of many remembrances shared by those who knew and worked beside him:

"I am very grateful to Chris Van de Velde for his mentorship when he served as a volunteer Executive Director at Awbury. Chris called himself 'General Manager', he had a ferocious energy to get things done, he had a gift for learning about each staff member and helping them to achieve their best in tune with their talents, he was a good listener and could fix just about anything. He had such great love and respect for his wife and her talents which made it clear to us, a mostly female staff, that he believed women were capable leaders. Chris rarely said no to an idea; he was always curious and willing to take risks and explore new directions. The arboretum was struggling to survive when Chris volunteered. Through his hard work, generosity and his skilled leadership Awbury now has a firm foundation to serve the community and preserve a beloved green space. "

Heather Zimmerman, Former Executive Director

"Fiercely compassionate comes to mind when I think of all that Chris represents for the Philly Goat Project.It was Chris, ten years ago, who listened to our hope to start this country's first city-based goat program. He said, "As long as the goats are well cared for, don't smell or make noise, you can have your goat program." And we did! It was Chris who, one year later, and no spring chicken; climbed up on the roof of the goat barn and installed electricity by himself. He said, " You need electricity to run things well." And we did! It was Chris who just last spring came zooming up to the goat barn in his red sports car and excitedly handed me a donation to go towards the rehabilitation of Ray the goat, who was struggling to survive after enduring a leg amputation. And he did! It's been Chris all along, opening doors, steadfast and attentive in his determined and quiet way, leaving us all too soon, grateful and heartbroken in his wake."

Karen and Lily, founders of the Philly Goat Project

It is impossible to imagine Awbury today without Chris's years of service, a gift beyond measure. His dedication to this place and its people, including staff, Board, and community, has left an indelible mark, and we are forever grateful.

Our hearts are with Lee and family. Memorial Services will take place in February, 2027.