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A grand old flag - in need of some publicity

 By Julie Stoiber
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Surprise! Philadelphia has a city flag.

The azure-blue and golden-yellow banner whips in the wind atop City Hall and in a few other prominent places. But 110 years after it was adopted by city fathers, it hardly has the instant recognition of, say, Chicago's flag, which pops up on everything from street signs to bridge abutments.

A perky whirlwind wants to change that.

"You're going to start seeing your flag everywhere," said Brenda Exon, 49, a transplant from Kansas who calls herself the Philly Pride Lady and aims to raise the flag's profile and to pump up civic pride through it.

City Council gave her a boost last week with a resolution making March 27 Philadelphia Flag Day.

Exon will be honored by Council on March 31, along with a group of students from Benjamin Franklin High School. They plan to march into chambers singing "Philly Flag Rap & Scat," a ditty Exon wrote.

From there, she plans to launch a year's worth of flag-awareness events, culminating in a weeklong Philadelphia Flagmania celebration next March.

"People are full of pride about being Philadelphian," she said. "It can't be bad for any community to come together and celebrate itself."

That's not so far-fetched, says restaurateur Tony Luke Jr., who is on the board of Exon's Partners for Civic Pride Inc.

"I was born and raised here, and I've never seen anyone so knowledgeable about Philadelphia and so eager to share it," Luke said. "She will go anywhere to talk to anyone."

Exon got the sports talkers from WIP (610-AM) radio to fly the flag over their broadcast hub at the Super Bowl. She tracked down Will Smith Sr., the father of the Philly-born star, and persuaded him to serve on her board. She even has a way with streetwise teens.

Eileen Butler, assistant principal of Benjamin Franklin High School, where Exon volunteers, said: "We've got some tough kids here. They love her. They'll do anything for her."

The Philly Pride Lady - who darts around in homemade pinafores decorated with sequins, sports memorabilia, and stitched-on bits of every city thing you can think of - grew out of the Pennsylvania Pride Lady, a character

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Brenda Exon, the Philly Pride Lady, darts around in pinafores decorated with symbols of Philadelphia. She is planning a year's worth of flag-awareness events.

Exon developed as a history teacher in the Wallingford-Swarthmore School District.

"Parents screamed to get their children in her class," said Robert Rice, who was Exon's principal in 1994, when she left teaching to try to develop a television program on local history for children.

But that was harder than Exon imagined. And so she sought out the toughest possible audience: inner-city teens. When she approached administrators at Ben Franklin about volunteering there, one warned: "They'll eat you up and spit you out."

That was seven years ago. Since then, Exon has led students in a cleanup of Spring Garden Street and formed a Philly Pride Club, a model that she hopes to take to other schools.

"You feel like a superstar, just because you know Miss Philly Pride," junior Jamia Gardner said.

With her TV dreams on hold, she has thrown herself into reviving the vision of the flag's creator, the Rev. Henry McCook, a 19th-century Philadelphia minister and insect authority who hailed from Ohio.

Except that few people seem to know much about the flag. Exon and Partners for Civic Pride cofounder Robert Stoller, of Art in Motion Production Co., roamed the city a while ago with a video camera and asked 150 people to describe the flag.

Only two had a clue.

In the coming year, they plan to blanket the city with flag awareness. Said Exon: "It's not the flag itself, but what it stands for. *Philadelphia Maneto*."

Translation: "Let brotherly love continue."

That's the city motto, which was taken from the New Testament (Hebrews 13:1) and was spoken by a descendant of William Penn's on a visit to Philadelphia in the 1800s.

The motto appears in the center of the flag, below the city seal, on a yellow vertical stripe flanked by two blue stripes. On either side of the blue-and-yellow seal, which sports a plow-and-ship motif, are female figures representing peace and plenty.

Still, pretty as it sounds, Philadelphia's banner isn't a favorite of flag buffs'.

"Too much fussy little detail. You can't see that when it's flapping on a pole," said Peter Ansoff, who is president of the North American Vexillological Association, a flag scholars' group.

But that shouldn't stop Philadelphia from championing the old blue-and-yellow, said Ted Kaye, a member of the association and editor of the book *American City Flags*.

"It's still your flag, your civic symbol," he said. "It deserves to be widely flown."