

TRANSPORTATION B2  
EASING TRANSIT FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIESSOUTH PHILADELPHIA B3  
PEDESTRIAN KILLED IN HIT-AND-RUN CRASH

The Philadelphia Inquirer

CITY, SUBURBS &amp; SOUTH JERSEY

# PHILLY & REGION

## Free Library looks to turn the page on drama

**Tensions in the Author Events program sparked a series of departures. Months later, a new chapter is underway.**

By Elizabeth Wellington  
Staff Writer

The sold-out crowd in the 400-seat Central Library auditorium erupted into applause on a recent Wednesday evening as Bill Clinton, dressed in a dapper chocolate brown suit, walked across the stage to his cozy, leather chair.

Philadelphia was the former president's second stop on a five-city book tour touting his memoir, *Citizen: My Life After the White House*. MSNBC host and

Washington Post writer Jonathan Capehart moderated the easygoing conversation about the need for empathy in politics. The crowd was enthralled. "It was a great, great night," said Anthony Espinal, 21, an attendee. "It doesn't happen every night that you get to see a former president. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience."

Clinton's visit was the latest feather in the Free Library Author Events' cap. Introduced in 1994 as a way to sweeten the pot for prospective donors, Author Events has helped the Free Library Foundation raise millions of dollars for capital improvements and literacy programs like Read by 4th, Summer of Wonder, and One Book, One Philadelphia. Featured authors have included George Stephanopoulos, Sting, and Tamron Hall.

Five months ago, however, the

future of Author Events was seemingly in jeopardy after its four-person staff offered their resignations and, within 24 hours, were summarily fired. Philly's book community was frazzled. Donors stopped writing checks. Authors vowed never to return to the Free Library's stage.

So, what happened? The short answer is the Free Library Foundation's new executive director, Monique Moore Pryor, arrived in the stacks in 2023 with new ideas for fundraising and plans to expand Author Events beyond Parkway Central, with an emphasis that included neighborhood collaborations and not just cocktail party-worthy events. And as often happens when organizations bring in new management, the old guard — in this case, the former Author Events team led by 24-year Free Library Foundation veteran Andy

Kahan — clashed with the new boss.

The walkout came amid efforts to untangle the murky, decades-long relationship between the library and its foundation.

But it wasn't the end of the Author Events program.

"Of course, I wish it hadn't ended this way," Pryor said. "But the show will go on. It must. The city of Philadelphia deserves nothing less."

### How the Free Library Foundation works

The Library Company of Philadelphia, the nation's first library, founded by Ben Franklin in 1731, was more a private club than a public library, meaning members paid a yearly fee for the privilege of borrowing books. In 1891, William Pepper secured a \$225,000

bequest from his wealthy uncle to make books accessible to everyday Philadelphians, establishing the Free Library Foundation. Three years later, the Free Library opened in three cramped rooms in City Hall. Parkway Central Library opened in 1927.

The Free Library would eventually be funded by the city with its own separate operations budget. Still, the Free Library and the Free Library Foundation operated as one for more than a century.

It wasn't until 1988 that then-Free Library president and executive director Elliot L. Shelkrot filed incorporation papers establishing the Free Library Foundation as a separate nonprofit fundraising entity to manage capital campaigns and raise money for literary

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## Illuminating the way

Rabbi Yochanon Goldman, of the B'nai Abraham Chabad in Society Hill, lights the menorah to celebrate the second night of Hanukkah at an event hosted by the Center City Kehillah and the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia on Thursday at Rittenhouse Square. People gathered for an evening of music, prayer, candle lighting, and sufganiyot — traditional, and delicious, Hanukkah doughnuts. Monica Herndon / Staff Photographer

## The 92-year-old Korean War vet who could save the city \$11.4M

**Robert Faulds combs the internet for Philly residents who are due tax relief — and for others who aren't.**

By Layla A. Jones  
Staff Writer

Robert Faulds is a Korean War Navy veteran, a Kensington native, and a retired insurance professional. At 92 years old, he has now become an amateur internet sleuth, too. With no staff and only a few simple tools, Faulds tracks down Philadelphians eligible for a city property tax relief program or who have unclaimed assets sitting unaccounted for with the state Treasury Department.

"Right now, I'm a little frustrated," griped Faulds on an early December Monday. "I don't quite understand how to use my new printer."

He needs his printer to generate the letters he's sent to roughly 1,500 Philadelphia families alerting them



Robert Faulds, 92, at his home in Wissinoming on Thursday. "He opened a door, and the city will benefit," said Michele Kelly of the Philadelphia City Controller's Office. Monica Herndon / Staff Photographer

to unclaimed funds tied to their name that he discovered online.

Faulds estimated he sends about 30 to 40 letters to Philadelphia residents each week. He spent about \$750 on ink over a two-year period, he said.

In return, he asks recipients just to mail back a stamp so he can keep sending out his own, unofficial letter alerts.

The letters are not forms; they vary depending on whether he's writing about an unclaimed

homestead exemption or unclaimed funds. But they all open with the salutation "Dear Neighbor" and end with the same request.

"If you are of a mind to be a little generous and can send me a postage stamp that I could use to send another person a copy of the same proposal, that would be nice," he recited.

He's received stamps, but he's gotten back much more, too.

One recipient who declined to be named because of concerns about privacy gave Faulds a \$2,000 check. Others have sent checks for \$50 and \$100, Faulds said. A nearby neighbor who learned of the homestead exemption from Faulds visited him with a \$100 thank-you gift.

Faulds finds Philadelphians with unclaimed cash or an untapped homestead exemption by searching the city's property website and the Pennsylvania Treasury's unclaimed funds database.

This past year, Faulds' research prompted what Michele Kelly, director of special investigations at the Philadelphia City Controller's

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## Largest judgments of 2024 by juries in Philly

**Plaintiffs were awarded more than \$3.3 billion in civil lawsuits this year, though much of that total was reduced on appeal.**

By Abraham Gutman  
Staff Writer

Philadelphia's civil courtrooms have a national reputation for the large verdicts personal injury lawyers secure in them, and this year the city's jurors didn't buck the trend.

Juries heard nearly 220 cases that went to verdict this year heading into Christmas, and they awarded more than \$3.3 billion in roughly 100 verdicts in favor of plaintiffs, according to data from Common Pleas Court. Verdicts ranged from \$800 to \$2.25 billion, but the majority of the overall sum came from 12 so-called nuclear verdicts of \$10 million or more.

Tort-reform proponents, who advocate for measures such as caps on civil trial verdicts, point to the growth in large verdicts as proof that Philadelphia is a "judicial hellhole."

But attorneys who litigate trials in Philly cite some of this year's largest verdicts as evidence the system is working, with judges operating as checks following a jury's decision that can reduce the award size or even order a new trial.

Here are the five largest verdicts of 2024:

### \$2.25 billion against Monsanto in a Roundup weed killer case

It doesn't get much larger than this.

A Philadelphia jury hit agricultural giant Monsanto with the whopping verdict in January, after finding that the company's popular weed killer product, Roundup, caused the blood cancer of a Lycoming County man.

The vast majority of the verdict — \$2 billion — was in punitive damages, and the remaining \$250 million was meant to compensate the plaintiff, John McKivison, for the harm he endured.

Over the summer, a Philadelphia judge reduced the verdict by more than 80%, to \$400 million in total.

The case was one of dozens of lawsuits against Monsanto filed in Philadelphia, and thousands nationally, making similar claims.

Philadelphia juries have heard seven Roundup cases since 2023, and Monsanto successfully defended itself in three.

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