Morris Pesin, which is not to say that he regularly gets down on hands and knees and exorts his front lawn to grow faster. Rather, that is his way of describing nearly 40 years spent as one of the state's foremost civic activists, a distinction that earned him a 1985 Volunteer Action Award from President Reagan.

Although Pesin served two terms as an independent member of the Jersey City city council, his greatest impact has come as a leader of a spirited band of private citizens in Hudson County. "People at some stage of their lives have to get out on the firing line," he explains. Over the years, Pesin has done just that, fighting to keep a racetrack from being built in Secaucus, battling a plan to uproot the trees along Kennedy Boulevard in Jersey City, and, most recently, kicking up a fuss to help preserve the landmark Hudson County Courthouse.

His passion, however, is Liberty State Park, the 800-acre urban oasis that has been carved out of the Jersey City waterfront. Pesin conceived of the idea in 1958. In a now legendary publicity stunt, he paddled a canoe from the shoreline to the Statue of Liberty to underscore the need for a public park near the famous monument. It took eighteen years, but his dream became reality when Liberty State Park was opened in 1976. Appropriately, the entrance road is named Morris Pesin Drive.

It will take another fifteen to twenty years for the Liberty State Park master plan to be fully implemented. At age 74, Pesin does not expect to see the final result, but that hasn't kept him from shaping its development. Five years ago he blocked an attempt to erect a theme park on the site. Pesin has instead pushed to make it a haven for the arts. He launched an annual ethnic festival and, as volunteer director of the Jersey City Cultural Arts Commission, inaugurated a series of free summer big band concerts and dance performances. Every one of his weekends for the last ten years has been devoted to producing the arts series. With his typical hands-on approach, Pesin occasionally can be seen shoving loudspeakers around onstage.

He is that committed to every square inch of Jersey City. While many friends have slipped off to Florida, Morris Pesin has no intention of heading south even though he retired from the clothing business eleven years ago. "People who don't like the city run," he says, "and we've had hundreds of thousands of people run and leave. That's okay. But those of us who have remained have an ingrained love for our city and our roots."