

Park Support Groups of Baltimore City: **The Evesham Park Neighborhood Association**

Walking through the northern half of Evesham Park is a relaxing experience and seems far removed from the commotion of most of Baltimore City. Despite the presence of Northern Parkway to the south and York Road to the west, the small green space is quiet and peaceful. Trash is scarce, and well maintained gardens bloom off to the side of the main path. The jewel of the park is a beautiful wooden concert stage, which bears none of the signs of graffiti or other abuse that one might expect to find. Yet as lovely as Evesham is today, it was very different just a few years ago.

The park off Evesham Avenue was created when Northern Parkway was built in the 1970s. The Park is split by Northern Parkway and the two sections are connected by a pedestrian bridge that stretches above the busy road. In the late 70's and early 80's, the northern half of the park was a gathering spot for families and boasted a variety of playground activities. By the 90s, however, the wooden play equipment had begun to decay, and was finally removed. Neglect caused the park to deteriorate, and eventually it became the sort of place that most people avoided – overgrown, covered in trash, and generally unsafe.

This state of affairs began to change for the better in 2001, when residents banded together to reclaim the park. One of their first acts was to revive a garden that had been planted in the park by a neighbor who had since moved. These efforts were coordinated by Leslie Wietscher, then a 23-year resident of the

neighborhood. She had long been a member of a larger community group based to the east but was tired of seeing Evesham Park suffer from a lack of attention, and she wanted to find a way to create an energy with neighbors who were most directly impacted... those who could most benefit from new life being breathed into the park and the immediate community. After much thought and discussion, the neighborhood adjacent to the park decided to form a new organization that would focus on a smaller section of the community. New neighborhood boundaries were decided upon, and the Evesham Park Neighborhood Association (EPNA) held its kick-off party in March of 2002.

From the beginning, EPNA has been focused on action. Immediately after the group's formation, representatives from the Department of Recreation & Parks were invited to Evesham to look at the work that needed to be done. Members of the Department returned with heavy equipment and a crew the next day and began removing overgrowth. Shortly after, community members gathered for the Mayor's Spring cleanup and spent the day cleaning, weeding, and pruning. This work continued throughout that spring and summer. The group has never been afraid of letting the city know when there have been problems in the park or in the neighborhood, but has balanced this with sincere letters of appreciation when those problems have been solved.

No other factor has been as crucial in helping EPNA reach its goals as the

organization's partnership with the development company Struever Bros. Eccles & Rouse. Each year, the company administers a day of volunteerism for its staff and associates called the James W. Rouse (JWR) Community Service Day. At EPNA's request, Evesham Park became a JWR project site in 2002, and the company has returned to the park for four years in a row. Some of Struever Bros.'s contributions include tree plantings, the installation of volleyball equipment, benches, and the installation of matching signs for both the park and the neighborhood as a whole. The long-lasting nature of the connection between EPNA and Struever Bros. can almost certainly be attributed to the willingness that the community has shown to maintain and continue projects done in the park.

More than anything else, EPNA's ability to get things done is showcased by the group's annual free concert in the park. The first concert was held in the summer of 2002, and was a simple affair: attendees brought their own picnics and blankets, and a local band provided the entertainment. As the years have passed, the event has grown larger, and now includes a wide variety of refreshments, including dinner hot off the grill! The park's stage was designed by residents

of EPNA and built through their partnership with Struever Bros. in 2004. In addition to grants from the Baltimore Office of Arts & Promotion and Comcast, EPNA has relied on local businesses for funds, supplies, and help with advertising for the concert. In the spring of 2006, the association received a Partnerships for Parks grant, administered by the Parks & People Foundation and funded by Recreation & Parks, to plant evergreens behind the stage, install a compost bin, and fund part of the following summer's concert.

Although there's still much to be done in Evesham Park, the neighborhood association has been able to make some amazing changes in the last six years. Part of this success may be due to the fact that the group's leaders were coming directly from a preexisting association. They were able to look at the things they liked and didn't like about their former organization, and build a structure based on what they thought would work for them. Equally importantly, a sense of sociability has always characterized EPNA's way of doing things – from plant exchanges with surrounding neighborhoods to community barbecues and holiday pot lucks.



A father and his son enjoy a warm day at Evesham Avenue Park

WHAT: The Evesham Park Neighborhood Association

WHERE: Evesham Avenue Park in the Evesham Park community of northern Baltimore City

WHEN: Since 2002

WHY: To “sustain a quality of life that benefits the residents, their guests, passers-by and surrounding neighborhoods”

Based on interviews with Leslie Wietscher and Nick Fuhr and on information compiled during the summer of 2006.