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East Siders embark on effort to restore Columbus Park

East Siders embark on effort to restore park

July 31, 2003

DICK CASE NEIGHBORHOODS

When is a park not a park?

When it's a swatch of green space that feels unused and unloved. When it gets to be neighbors are afraid to go there, it's time for things to change.

Syracuse has nearly 1,000 acres in parks, some of the spaces reserved since the early 1800s. It's a decent system for a city our size; some parks are in better shape than others, of course.

The gems seem to be used and loved.

A sunny morning this week, Caroline Tauxe, Ellen Micoli Soffa and I stood in what's left of an ornamental fountain pool in Columbus (aka Lexington) Park on the East Side. The place is an acre and a half and about to be treasured again, after years of neglect.

The 16-year-old grass-roots organization, Eastside Neighbors in Partnership, has teamed with the city and the state College of



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Environmental Science and Forestry's Center for Community Design and Research in a project to restore Columbus-Lexington. The park's been there more than a century.

Caroline Tauxe has a Ph.D. in anthropology. The past six years she's been dealing with the realities of one of the city's most distressed territories, bordered by East Genesee and Croly streets, Erie Boulevard East and Interstate 81.

Caroline is assistant director of ENIP, which came together among neighbors on Maple Street in 1987. The organization has a staff of six, oversight of a lively band of volunteers and ownership of 25 rehabilitated properties in the neighborhood.

Ellen Micoli Soffa's a SUNY ESF graduate student in the community design project and an ENIP intern. These colleagues have big dreams for their park.

"A year from now," Caroline's saying, "we expect it to look a lot better. It's already being used; the neighbors are taking back their park."

"We want it to look special because it is special," Ellen explains.

Except for a kids' spray fountain that doesn't work and a small play lot, the park hasn't changed much since the Cases lived on the other side of Columbus Avenue 40 years ago. It's a wedge of old trees, old brick and

grass that needs work.

The park had been a showpiece of Syracuse's Victorian era, when many green spaces around the city were lavish with flower gardens, paths and gaudy fountains. The parks department had teams of gardeners working the larger parks back then; today the images survive only as pretty postcards.

We have those views of Columbus. At the turn of the century, the foundation where we stood the other day held a fountain of three tiers, where water spilled down over cherub figures. Later, the fountain was simpler. Then, it disappeared.

"Parks have to be low-maintenance these days," Caroline Tauxe explains.

Eastside Neighbors manages a corps of VISTA volunteers that Caroline calls "very successful" in its neighborhood improvement projects. Two years ago, the workers looked at their park and decided it had improvement project all over it.

ENIP took the idea to the Action Eastside planning group, which adopted the park as a priority. City parks officials agreed to be partners, promising a new playground, perhaps by the end of this summer.

The neighbors also began to use the park, putting public programs in the space with the help of its summer Youth Action workers, neighborhood youngsters who do everything from planning programs to handing out fliers.

Jim Dessauer is a founder of ENIP and its executive director. The staff calls him "our dreamer."

Jim told me this week that Columbus can be a "beautiful, useful, central park" again and ENIP means to help it get there.

"It's been under-used for years because some people were afraid to go in there," he explains. "Actually, it's a community asset."

The neighborhood has a group of young men called the Lexington Diamonds who hang in the park, worrying parents about sending children there, according to Willisha Coker, a neighbor in her third summer as a Youth Action worker.

"We want to change that," this Fowler High school student says.

Jim believes it is changing, mostly because of the programs ENIP brought to the park over the past two summers, including street peace rallies, storytelling and community picnics.

"The young men joined us," he says. "There was no tension. We plan to continue events in the park. When people see things happening there, they change their perception. They see it as a positive thing. We like seeing it full of people."

SUNY ESF students and faculty prepared designs for the new look of the park. Each was tweaked by neighbors, who voted on favorites at park picnics. The two finalists will be made one over the next two weeks.

"We could even bring back some kind of fountain," Ellen, of SUNY ESF, explains. "The kids really want water, maybe a water slide."

Meanwhile, Caroline Tauxe is working up a new application at the request of VISTA national that could greatly expand the volunteer effort in the neighborhood. The VISTAs would work with neighbors on improvements and environmental, cultural and anti-violence issues.

One piece of the plan, Caroline says, is a collaboration with the Onondaga Historical Association that would allow the young people to learn historic research methods and create a history exhibit for the park.

This would tie to another dream of the neighbors: to rename the park in honor of a former neighbor, the black abolitionist Jermain Loguen. The minister and his wife, Caroline, lived in a house that once sat on the Rite-Aid lot at Pine and East Genesee streets.

It's known to historians as the primary safe house for fugitive slaves who reached Syracuse in the 1850s.

Dick Case writes about neighborhoods every Thursday. Reach him at 470-2254, or by e-mail, citynews@syracuse.com.

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