

LET'S GET IT ON

WATTS BRANCH PARK IN WASHINGTON WAS ONCE A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION FOR LEGENDARY MOTOWN SINGER MARVIN GAYE, BUT DISINVESTMENT SAW IT DETERIORATE INTO A FORGOTTEN, CRIME-RIDDEN STRIP OF LAND. **STEVE COLEMAN**, DIRECTOR OF WASHINGTON PARKS AND PEOPLE, TELLS THE STORY OF HOW THE LOCAL COMMUNITY WAS INSPIRED TO BREATHE LIFE BACK INTO THE PARK.





A scant two-kilometre walk east of Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, brings the visitor to the city's long forgotten Anacostia River. On the east side of the River, a still less known stream valley - cut off most maps of the city - has emptied its eroded banks for generations. Home to Native American settlements for 4,000 years and to African Americans for hundreds of years, the park system lining the banks of Watts Branch stream is the longest municipal park in Washington. Yet most DC residents had until recently never seen or heard of it. Even many people living next to the park had no idea that it continued for four kilometres, because it did so only in theory: the greenway was disconnected and obstructed by unsafe and unconstructed streets, massive illegal dump piles, choking groves of invasive exotic weeds, widespread private encroachments and inholdings, and crime and violence unchecked by the presence of a single regular police patrol anywhere inside the park.

Dumping and disinvestment in the park had a ripple impact on the neighbourhoods rising from the banks of the stream. Long ago the site of the city's burning trash dump, the community had become a magnet for the dumping of a wide range of entrenched problems: decaying public housing, open-air drug markets, nightly shootings, burned out automobiles, and mountains of trash. In a capital with "the pursuit of happiness" in

its enabling documents, all of the playgrounds in the park had been removed as part of failed crime-fighting schemes, and children were being told to play in the streets rather than venture into the park. Faced with this onslaught, thousands of residents had fled to the suburbs from places they had called home for generations - a massive black exodus from the city.

When Washington Parks & People, DC's award-winning 15-year-old alliance of grass roots community park partnerships, was asked by the DC Department of Parks and Recreation to forge a partnership for the transformation of Watts Branch Park, some officials and community residents alike said that we would be crazy to attempt such a feat. Although we had been successful in transforming once violent parks into havens of the community, it was unclear how anyone could even dream of bringing a site like Watts Branch back to life.

We began our effort as we have always done - by walking in the park. Along the way, following an old rule that has opened untold doors for us, we said hello to everyone we met, asking them what they thought about the park and surrounding community. We quickly found a surprising range of people who cared deeply about the park: the retired police officer who came to be known as Officer Friendly for all he did to try to make the park come back to life, the old-timer who was baptized in the stream and played in the old



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<<< segregated amusement park nearby, the neighbourhood barber who found peace in the sound of the rushing water behind his shop, the convicted felon who had tears in his eyes talking about the mallards trying to live in the polluted waters of the stream, the youth “Natural Leaders” for whom playing in a safe, clean park was but a dream, and the keyboard player who remembered seeing a parkside performance by Marvin Gaye, the legendary Motown singer whose songs of environmental and social justice had been first inspired as he began his life of music in the park.

These conversations reminded us of some of the fundamentals of park revitalisation and regeneration:

1: The key to turning around any place is to start by learning what is good about it.

2: The strongest asset of any community park is the people who care about it and the bonds and responsibilities that they form with the place.

3: The special stories and history of even the most blighted site can raise standards and suggest possibilities for the future.

4: If community parks give life to the memories of elders and the dreams of young people, no amount of money or power can stop them. If they don't, no amount of money or power can save them.

5: Starting with the seemingly most fragile restoration - a home for ducks, a plot for pansies, a gathering place for children, a hillside for

concerts - can surprise and inspire some of the toughest cynics to renew their connection to the place.

These simple principles have enabled Parks & People and its partners to help produce seemingly miraculous transformations of community parks, providing technical support to community park partnerships throughout Washington and in many places across the U.S. and abroad. At Watts Branch, working with the DC government and many community partners, our Down by the Riverside Campaign has in the past four years helped leverage challenges into sometimes surprising achievements in a place where many thought so little was possible:

- ⚡ Helped young people to develop a 10-point Call to Action to save the park, which collected over 1,500 signatures;
- ⚡ Forged the first community park management partnership with DC Parks and Recreation;
- ⚡ Mobilized over 18,500 volunteers - the largest community park revitalisation/regeneration project in Washington DC's history;
- ⚡ Removed over 900 tonnes of trash and debris - equivalent to over 128 of London's red buses;
- ⚡ Planted hundreds of native trees and removed 15,000 exotic invasives choking the ecosystem;
- ⚡ Developed jobs and job training in the park;
- ⚡ Dramatically reduced crime and improved park safety;
- ⚡ Opened a successful youth farm market, displacing an open-air park

heroin market;

- ⚡ Created a natural hillside amphitheatre in what had been the most crime-ridden park area;
- ⚡ Developed a community master plan for the park, with park planning fairs open to all;
- ⚡ Produced park concerts, movies, tours, and Harvest Day parades;
- ⚡ Led interagency summit meetings to boost park collaboration and accountability;
- ⚡ Started Martin Luther King Nature Sanctuary, and planned retail native plant centre;
- ⚡ Began effort to formally name park after Marvin Gaye.

Here in the city with the highest US percentage of public green space, Parks & People is uniting the two greatest, most forgotten assets of our city for its advancement - our parks and our people. Thanks to the leverage of our partners and volunteers, much of this work has been accomplished with modest amounts of money. At the same time, the impact of our campaign has helped galvanise millions in new public and private capital funding for the park.

Today, although there is still much work to be done, Watts Branch is finally becoming a great park, and its transformation is bringing hope and inspiration to the surrounding communities and the entire city. This month, for the 35th anniversary of Earth Day and the 15th anniversary of its first park clean-up, Parks & People will lead a 26-mile walk across the city, called the

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Washington Ridge Crossing and Walk for Life, centered on the Watts Branch stream valley and the Anacostia River. Linking together many of the park sites that we have helped to turn around, and following a path that would have been deadly violent just a few short years ago, the walk will showcase how DC's parklands can link the entire city together and advance the health of all our communities.

In hundreds of park alliances that comprise the City Parks Alliance across the US, among the countless partners and members of GreenSpace in the UK, and around the world at the same time, people will be joining together to stand up for their special places on the Earth, now no longer forgotten. From Nobel Peace Prize Winner Wangari Mathai's Greenbelt Movement in Kenya to the Chipko tree movement in the Himalayas, from Eastern Europe to South America and Australia, millions of us are working in common cause for a better Earth, working in one park and community at a time to forge urgently needed new connections with the land and, through the land, with each other. What a proud day for Mother Earth.

Steve Coleman will be speaking at the forthcoming GreenSpace conference 'Parks for People' which will take place on 8th June 2005 in Liverpool. For more information, please go to: www.green-space.org.uk or call 0118 946 9060. ■

