



# **Improving Parks** *Improving Communities*



# Improving Parks

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Parks serve as safe havens in communities. For the next generation, they provide children with an expansive setting in which to learn to love nature, offer youth a place to cultivate a passion for mentorship and provide a field of dreams for young athletes. **Parks serve everyone – no matter your background, ethnicity or financial status.** Through enhancements, beautification and upgrades, a park is improved, but so too is a community.

From the Nay Aug Avenue Natural Play Area in the historic Lackawanna Valley in Scranton, Pennsylvania, to the Lou Costello, Jr. Recreation Center in Los Angeles, people of all ages gather in and enjoy protected places they call their own. A mobilized community takes ownership and pride in its parks, often bringing together volunteers to beautify a park or to strengthen a neighborhood by creating an inviting gathering place. **Parks are not just places, destinations or playgrounds: They are the fabric of communities.**

**NRPA partners with corporations, foundations and individuals to provide opportunities for all people to be physically active and enhance the places where they gather and enjoy the outdoors.** We are incredibly grateful for the support of funders who also see the profound value in transforming parks and communities and who often enlist their own employees to help in the process. This document shares some of the personal stories from our collective work together and examples of how not only local parks, but also the lives of the people who enjoy them have been improved.

# Destination Joy

Urbandale Park • City of Dallas

In the expansive Urbandale Park, covering almost 16 acres, community residents could find a retreat from the cracked concrete sidewalks that lined their streets. Yet, for many years, there wasn't a real place in the park that children could gather and play with abandon. About 10 years ago, there was a playground, but it was home to illegal activities and had been burned and eventually removed because of repeated vandalism.

The new playground, funded by **Niagara Bottling** and NRPA, set out to change this by once again creating a playground for kids. For Scott and Myra Cleary, this project couldn't have come at a better time. Their 6-year-old son, Max, was just learning to develop a love for interacting with other children. He had recently been diagnosed with autism, and his socializing skills were considered that of a boy half his age. With the new playground, Myra thought there'd a better chance of finding other kids who would be open to playing with him – or at least their parents would be understanding of the situation.

For the first time, Scott and Myra were hopeful. They discovered an organization that advocates and serves those with autism, and the best news was that it met once a week right there at the playground! Myra adds, "I just can't imagine what we would have done without our group that supports us through everything." Not only did the park become a new daily destination for them, but now they also had a community of other parents that could help guide them and shed light on how best to parent Max and meet his needs. **They met new friends in the area and couldn't help but think what a blessing a beautiful, new playground could offer!** And, most importantly, Max was starting to come out of his shell.

Here's to many more great days at Urbandale Park in Dallas!



# Earth's Wonderland

Nay Aug Avenue/Lackawanna Heritage Valley Authority • Scranton

The Lackawanna Valley's roots run deep. Located between New York City and Philadelphia, it's on the same route as the trains which have been transporting passengers and goods for more than 100 years – but it's not a destination. It's a place steeped in the rich colonial heritage of our forefathers. Life here, however, was not easy for families with young children.

Along the Lackawanna River, there were no parks and no activities for children – and there also was not a lot of hope. Struggling financially to make ends meet, Rohanna recalls how difficult it was to find free activities to do with her then-3-year-old twins. “I wanted to be able to take them to a park where they could play and just be kids. I never feel comfortable taking them to the parks around our neighborhood. There are a lot of gangs that have overrun the area, and I worry about my little girls.”

Until the Nay Aug Avenue Nature Play Area project, funded by NRPA and **American Water Charitable Foundation**, the outlook was bleak, especially for those who couldn't afford clubs and organized sports. **The community came together to build the park which is a haven where families can celebrate together and raise their children in a safe play environment.** The opportunity to connect with the environment and for an imaginative way to play here has proven to be an extraordinary bond for the families in North Scranton.



“The Natural Play Area on Nay Aug Avenue has been a welcome addition to our neighborhood,” says Tina Imel, who is a young mother. “My son, who is now three, has been visiting the park since its formation. It has been one of our favorite parks to visit, not only because of its close proximity to where we live, but also because it's environmentally friendly and the natural elements really encourage imaginative play. We made friends at the park with people from all over the area. The park has attracted positive attention to an area that needed it, and it has been wonderful for parents like myself who live in the neighborhood. As my son grows, different elements at the park become new again. We will be off to ride bikes on the Tike Bike Trail soon!”

The Lackawanna Valley has sprouted a new way of life, nurturing creativity, respect for the earth and a city of energized families who see a spring of hope for the future.

# Game On!

Lou Costello, Jr. Recreation Center • City of Los Angeles

It's a balmy June night and the stands of the baseball diamonds at the Lou Costello, Jr. Recreation Center are packed. The collective voice of the crowd hums and is broken ever so often by squeals of laughter and excitement as the lights beam across the baseball field in this Boyle Heights neighborhood.

"That's my son over there, number 8," Marta Gonzalez says proudly to the mom sitting next to her. She recalled that last season the seats were so uncomfortable she reluctantly missed out on the majority of his games. Plus, it was not the safest place at night, and she didn't want to put her son in harm's way – even though she knew his dream was to become a professional baseball player. But, today is a different story.

After the **Coca Cola Refreshing Community Spaces Project, The Lou Costello, Jr. Recreation Center has instilled a renewed sense of community pride and has become a welcome backdrop for celebrations, gatherings and lifelong memories.** Friends and family members come together and take ownership for maintaining it and keeping it safe, as if it were their own backyard.

Today, Marta's family has filled two rows of bleachers to show support and root for her son and his baseball team. Most of the seats used to be empty, but, tonight, they're packed.



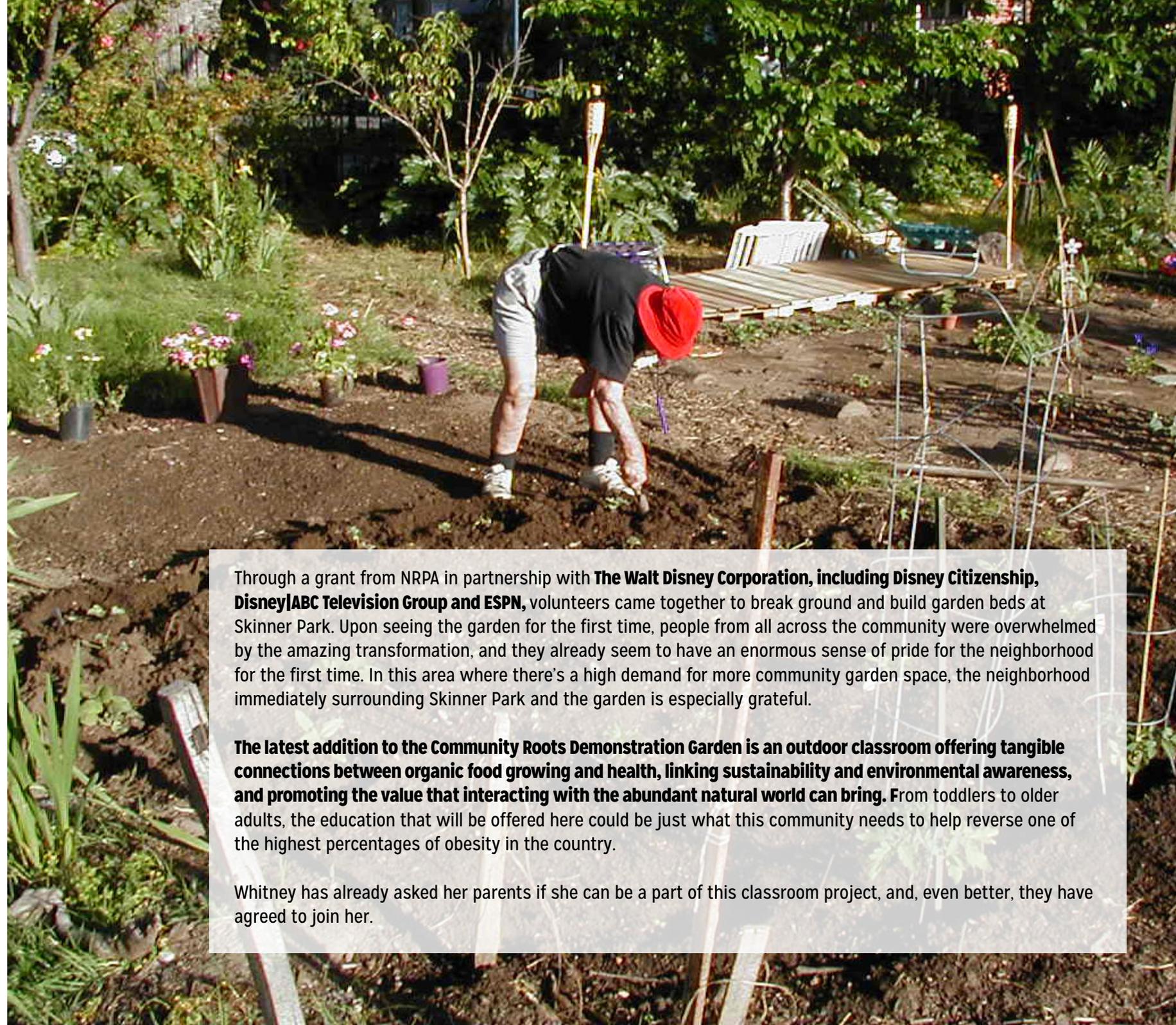
Players take their positions around the diamond, and the anticipation mounts. The voices in the stands hush as Emilio Gonzalez steps to the plate, bends his knees and pulls his elbows back, just like his coach has taught him for the past few months. Silence. And then the crack of the bat breaks the silence followed by a deafening roar of cheers, and everyone leaps to their feet. Emilio's first-ever homerun! Marta jumps up and down, screaming with excitement, grabbing her sister's hand and chanting in unison: "Emilio, Emilio, Emilio!" He drops the bat and rounds each base, carefully tagging each pad, smiling from ear to ear as the clatter and whistles of the fans cheer him on. Rounding third base into home, he looks up at his mother and puts his arm into the air, pumping his fist.

# Putting Down Roots

Skinner Park • City of Chicago

For Whitney, growing up in Chicago meant loving pizza. It was usually from the corner store where they would heat up frozen pizzas, and she would grab a slice on her way home from school. Even though her parents had the best of intentions, eating fruits and vegetables wasn't part of their lifestyle. The closest grocery store was miles away and on their budget, buying fresh produce was not at the top of their list.

For a field trip, Whitney's sixth grade class visited the Community Roots Demonstration & Community Garden, located in Skinner Park on W. Monroe Street. It was an open house event, and she had never experienced anything like it before. **There, she learned how a seed becomes an edible plant, and she and her classmates got to pick kale and chard, purple and yellow carrots, the biggest zucchini she'd ever seen, juicy berries and every kind of herb under the sun.** Whitney and her friends also got their faces painted, took their picture in a "Be a Butterfly" booth and watched a chef make a delicious vegetable stew called ratatouille. She had never had so many vegetables in one bowl. It had a really funny name, but she was surprised at how good it tasted!



Through a grant from NRPA in partnership with **The Walt Disney Corporation, including Disney Citizenship, Disney|ABC Television Group and ESPN**, volunteers came together to break ground and build garden beds at Skinner Park. Upon seeing the garden for the first time, people from all across the community were overwhelmed by the amazing transformation, and they already seem to have an enormous sense of pride for the neighborhood for the first time. In this area where there's a high demand for more community garden space, the neighborhood immediately surrounding Skinner Park and the garden is especially grateful.

**The latest addition to the Community Roots Demonstration Garden is an outdoor classroom offering tangible connections between organic food growing and health, linking sustainability and environmental awareness, and promoting the value that interacting with the abundant natural world can bring.** From toddlers to older adults, the education that will be offered here could be just what this community needs to help reverse one of the highest percentages of obesity in the country.

Whitney has already asked her parents if she can be a part of this classroom project, and, even better, they have agreed to join her.

# Everyone Is There

Joe Kneip Park • City of North Las Vegas

It's 5:45 a.m. Through the dusk, a group of fitness enthusiasts has gathered for their morning workout. Finding the motivation to exercise in a gym at that early hour was challenging for this crowd, but Gary, Sean, Steven, April, Jonathan, Sarah, Jim and Melanie found in each other just what they needed to get fit and enjoy a breath of fresh air at the Joe Kneip outdoor workout area, before heading off to work. It's not just about a "workout." It's the support system and the setting of this magical park that has changed their lives and their outlook. In just three months of meeting here five days a week, Gary has lost 20 pounds, Sean is off of his blood pressure medication, Steven's love for fitness has fueled a new and fulfilling career path, April fits into her pre-pregnancy clothes, Jonathan has been reconnected with his father, and Jim and Melanie have found each other.

**Each year, within the city hosting its Annual Conference, NRPA coordinates a complete build or makeover of a local park in partnership with park equipment manufacturers, community organizations and donors.** Joe Kneip Park was the setting for this transformation in 2015 and, as has been the outcome after each Parks Build Community project, positive change in the community has been inspired in so many ways.

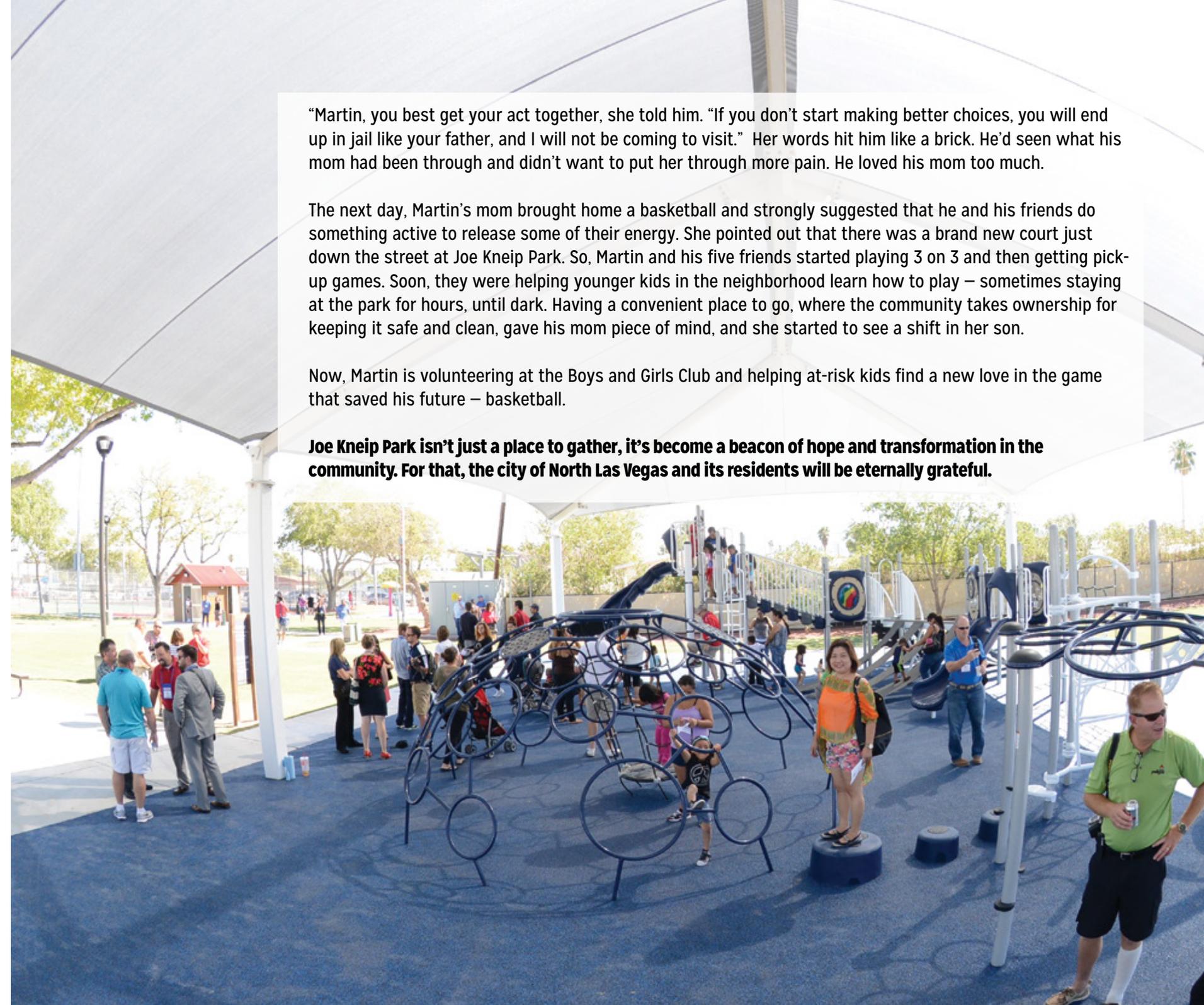
Martin and his friends were always looking for a good time, and it usually involved activities like playing video games, cruising around the neighborhood and loitering in the neighborhood convenience store trying to get beer. They thought they could get away with stealing some alcohol, but they were grabbed by the store owner and arrested for petty theft. After spending a couple of hours in the police station, Martin's mom, a no-nonsense single parent, came to pick him up, and she was not happy.

"Martin, you best get your act together, she told him. "If you don't start making better choices, you will end up in jail like your father, and I will not be coming to visit." Her words hit him like a brick. He'd seen what his mom had been through and didn't want to put her through more pain. He loved his mom too much.

The next day, Martin's mom brought home a basketball and strongly suggested that he and his friends do something active to release some of their energy. She pointed out that there was a brand new court just down the street at Joe Kneip Park. So, Martin and his five friends started playing 3 on 3 and then getting pick-up games. Soon, they were helping younger kids in the neighborhood learn how to play – sometimes staying at the park for hours, until dark. Having a convenient place to go, where the community takes ownership for keeping it safe and clean, gave his mom piece of mind, and she started to see a shift in her son.

Now, Martin is volunteering at the Boys and Girls Club and helping at-risk kids find a new love in the game that saved his future – basketball.

**Joe Kneip Park isn't just a place to gather, it's become a beacon of hope and transformation in the community. For that, the city of North Las Vegas and its residents will be eternally grateful.**



# Working It Out

Labor Street Park • City of San Antonio

In the Lavaca neighborhood of San Antonio, Mary and her family gathered with hundreds of other volunteers at 7 a.m. on a Saturday to do some serious work. At Labor Street Park, their neighborhood park, there was a run-down basketball court and little else. It didn't feel like a fun or safe place to Mary's parents, Eduardo and Leticia, to let their 8-year-old daughter and her 6-year-old brother, Maurice, play.

All Mary and Maurice wanted was a place to play with their cousins. Living in public housing didn't allow for much space to be a kid.

Mary urged her family to be part of the project, but they were surprised at how many people had come to participate. **By 9 a.m., they were installing a beautiful new playground with swings and slides and pouring concrete, all thanks to a grant from the National Recreation and Park Association in tandem with The Coca Cola Company.** Mary thought to herself, we are doing something amazing to gather all of these people together. Look at what so many hands can do! Local companies supplied water and food, and the kids could hardly contain their excitement, jumping up and down at the thought of a fun place they could call their own.

Ernesto, a man in his sixties, and his wife, Gloria, held each other's hands as they strolled through Labor Street Park one morning. Having been a competitive soccer player "back in his day" in Mexico, Ernesto watched the people doing the Circuit Training class. He became overwhelmed with emotion as he recalled those glorious times when he was actively conditioning and felt like the king of the field. "I want to do this class, Gloria!" he told his wife. He saw it as a challenge. Gloria just laughed and said, "Oh mijo, you can do whatever your crazy mind decides to do." Ernesto took off his jacket and hat, and got in position to do a sit-up. The instructor commented on how great Ernesto was doing and, by the end of the 45 minutes, even though he could only do modified moves, he felt like a new man, full of vitality and joy.



Labor Street Park is a gathering place for people who formerly had nowhere to exercise and get fit, nowhere to find their inner child and nowhere for kids to play safely. Now, you hear teens on the basketball court egging each other on, see moms exercising with their kids in strollers and listen to children squealing with joy as their parents push them on the swings. The park has brought vibrancy to the colorful city of San Antonio, and for the volunteers who came together to create this haven, it is their community's pride and joy.

Through these stories we hope we have illustrated that investments in park improvement projects are changing lives and communities. More than ever, now is the time to demonstrate how effectively we can create healthy and prosperous communities while protecting and building an appreciation for the environment. Together, let us show how essential local parks and recreation centers are to our society and how they are a key component to establishing viable communities for all.

If you are interested in partnering with NRPA to improve parks, **contact Rachel Banner at 703.858.2159 or [rbanner@nrpa.org](mailto:rbanner@nrpa.org)**



22377 Belmont Ridge Road  
Ashburn, VA 20148-4501  
800.626.NRPA (6772)  
[www.nrpa.org](http://www.nrpa.org)

