

The Willy St. Park Corner of Williamson and Brearly Streets

Once a wasteland of weeds, trash, oil changes, car repairs and debris from other sundry missions, The Willy St. Park is now a restful retreat from the constant hype of the busy area it serves.

The inspiration for the park came about after the lot owner began construction of a fast food drive-thru restaurant, but abandoned it when area residents turned out in force, picketing their objection not only to the project but to the concept, which they felt would destroy the character of the area.

The date was 1977. Richard Smith, whose home and motorcycle shop (now the pet shop) abutted the lot, began to think that not only he, but many others as well, really cared about that land, the neighborhood and what happened to it.

With this in mind, he entered into a land contract with the owner, convinced that the neighborhood would rally round to collectively buy and support his idea for a community park.

Until 1982, Smith and a small group of area residents kept the park dream alive, hauling in dirt, pickup load by pickup load, to cover the gravel base, creating mounds reminiscent of its early Indian habitants and planting whatever was donated, rescued from curbsides or purchased for pennies at late-season nursery sales. The front half of the lot bordering Willy Street was beginning to look like a park.

At the end of that same year, Smith and a loosely knit group of Marquette/Willy Street residents who were the initiators and producers of the first Willy Street Fairs, donated the Fair proceeds to the park and formed into the "Friends of Willy Street," an organization which began to raise funds. They appointed a committee from The Wilmar Center, Marquette Neighborhood Association (MNA), Commonwealth and interested citizens to negotiate with the lot's owner, Jerome Minihan, who then agreed to donate the property for use as a community park. After this, MNA donated \$600, businesses and residents contributed generously and the back taxes were paid.

The deed was held in trust by Commonwealth until a city, state and federally approved park organization could be formed to receive the deed. At that point, Commonwealth received an art grant to finish the back portion of the park, where the circular cement bench and larger mounds are located. Although the sodded area was part of the grant, all other plantings and arrangements are the work of volunteers.

Today, the park is Smith's 1977 dream come to fruition. Although work is still in progress, in Smith's words, it has become what he envisioned 13 years ago, "a place of peace, harmony and beauty, a place where neighborhood residents, with no politics involved, can learn to work with rather than against the earth."

If you are interested in getting involved with The Willy St. Park, contact Bill Jolin at 242-0712.

—Submitted by Ann Walker