



GENERALLY, FRIENDS OF PARKS GROUPS unite to preserve, protect, and restore the physical landscape. Even the most ardent “parkies” readily admit, for example, that driving drug dealers from a public square doesn’t begin to attack the larger issue of substance abuse, but it does make the place available for law-abiding citizens to enjoy.

Steve Coleman, director of the nonprofit Washington Parks and People, sees things a little differently. He believes parks play a significant role in improving quality of life both inside and outside a park’s boundaries. “If community is not to become an abstraction, parks are absolutely vital,” Coleman says. “Bringing seemingly hopeless and forgotten places to life makes the community come alive through them. It’s about rebuilding hope and vision.”

He has ample experience from which to draw these conclusions. Over the past 15 years, Coleman and his organization have helped revitalize some of the District of Columbia’s most dangerous parks. It all began in 1990, when Washington was the murder capital of the United States and Coleman’s neighborhood greenspace, Meridian Hill Park, colloqui-

STONE SOUP
When it comes to reviving parks in distressed neighborhoods, Steve Coleman says everyone from landscape architects to kids has something to contribute.

By Susan Hines

ally known as known as Malcolm X Park, was one of the most dangerous places in the city.

Meridian Hill Park, part of the National Park Service (NPS) system, began as a beautiful place. Landscape architect George Burnap designed it in 1914, and Horace Peaslee later revised its plan. The New York firm Vital, Brinckerhoff, and Geffert created the planting scheme. Opened to the public in 1936, it is a neoclassical villa for the people. Construction ended on the park when the United States entered World War II, and it was never fully completed. However, the 12-acre expanse contains a series of formal promenades, terraces, and cascading fountains.

Coleman was head of his neighborhood association when a local boy was shot on a street near the park in January of 1990. He died in the arms of Coleman’s housemate, and as is often the case when tragedy strikes, people gathered to try to make sense of it. “I called a meeting at my home and over 50 people came,” Coleman remembers. “They filled the bottom floor of my house.”

In response to the killing, police urged people to stay indoors. “They said, whatever you do, don’t

Steve Coleman, director of Washington Parks and People, is shown at one of the many entrances to Watts Branch Park in the District of Columbia.

SHARED WISDOM

go into the park," Coleman recounts. "The park was seen as a center of violence. But if we didn't go into the park, if we stayed inside, who would be left to counter what made D.C. the murder capital?" Someone at the meeting remembered hearing of a grandparents' organization in Southeast Washington that helped its community by standing on street corners and greeting people. Coleman's group, then called Residents of Adams Morgan (RAM), contacted the senior citizens and from them gleaned the rules of engagement that guide Washington Parks and People to this day:

- ◆ Always say hello.
- ◆ Never carry a weapon or anything that could be perceived as such—"including a large flashlight or a small dog," Coleman notes.
- ◆ Travel and work in multiracial groups.



Developed in partnership with stream valley residents, the Watts Branch master plan, here, has galvanized support for the park and its surrounding community. Bottom left, Ian Tyndall's rendering illustrates the future of Watts Branch.

Armed only with these three principles and wearing bright orange hats, Coleman and two companions entered the park on a cold winter's evening shortly after the shooting. "As we approached the overlook, we saw two shadows," Coleman reports. Although nervous, they said hello and tentatively held out their hands.

The RAM patrol had encountered two long-time users of the park. The first was a local minister and retired teacher who had visited the park every fine day for over 45 years and was known as the unofficial mayor of Meridian Hill Park. His companion was a former inmate and recovering drug addict whose efforts on behalf of Meridian Hill eventually earned him recognition as Washington, D.C.'s volunteer of the year. As Coleman tells it, these two men became his friends and mentors, and this chance meeting marked the beginning of his education in community building—what he calls "Neighborhood Park 101."

Friends of Meridian Hill was born just a few weeks later, after a letter to the *Washington Post* noted the sudden growth of local interest in the place and warned that this effort, like so many before it, was doomed to failure unless the broader social issues of the neighborhood were addressed. "That's why we became Friends of Meridian Hill—not Friends of Meridian Hill Park or Friends of Meridian Hill/Malcolm X Park," Coleman says. "We recognized that it had to be the whole historic hilltop. We didn't have the luxury of a park that is a complete world unto itself—like Central Park."

An NPS superintendent, who had once said, "Nobody calls me about this park," soon found his phone ringing off the hook. Meetings between the community and NPS over the future of Meridian Hill were quickly organized. In the months and years that followed, Friends of Meridian Hill did many of the things such groups usually do, including removing

trash, planting, and celebrating Earth Day. Members also continued safety patrols and advocated restoration of the park's many historic features.

But Friends of Meridian Hill did something more, too. "Every community has hidden assets," Coleman asserts. "We needed to revitalize and develop not just the visible landscape but also the invisible landscape." That meant researching the history of the park, talking to locals about their memories of the park's past, and forming alliances with local institutions—from the police precinct to performing arts groups. "Any public space fails or succeeds to the extent that it leverages partner-

"A park is not just something you look at; it is a place, a hub of activity. It doesn't have to be about just preserving what once was. The past can be prologue, a jumping-off point."

ship, for example, and brought music and dance back. When members learned the site had served as a Civil War encampment, they asked reenactors who had participated in the filming of *Glory*, a movie about the first black regiment in the Civil War, to come to the park to meet neighborhood children. "For the kids, it was a visit from another time," Coleman says as he shows photographs of children looking up in awe at the soldiers in blue.

Coleman says that events like these should happen all the time. "We are the only country in the world with an enabling document that specifies the pursuit of happiness," he notes.

"Yet we are so serious, so specialized, we have forgotten how to nourish play. The danger in our specialized society is that we become passive and leave everything to somebody else—the parks department or some government office."

Turning the entire park into a stage for an afternoon dance performance, as Meridian Hill did in 1992, and making its lengthy greenswards regularly available for soccer—despite the inevitable wear on the turf—is as significant, Coleman argues, as any other element of park revitalization.

Friends of Meridian Hill became Washington Parks and People after a merger with Friends of D.C. Parks in 1998. Parks and People aimed to bring the successful strategies developed

ships," Coleman says. "The more you ask for help and share power, the more you will build the very resources and broader power base you need to realize your vision."

Working with organizations large and small, the Friends ultimately realized their dream. Young musicians from the city's Levine School of Music performed at the park, and a local athletic store sponsored a 10K race that linked Meridian Hill to the White House. Working with police, the group helped reduce crime in Meridian Hill by 98 percent. And the partnership with NPS proved equally fruitful, earning the Friends the National Park Foundation's 1994 Leadership Award for the leading U.S. community/parks partnership.

In 1994, the group helped win designation of the park as the first U.S. National Historic Landmark in the designed landscape category. But the Friends aimed at more than preservation and restoration. "A park is not just something you look at; it is a place, a hub of activity," Coleman notes. "It doesn't have to be about just preserving what once was. The past can be prologue, a jumping-off point." The group discovered that Meridian Hill had a history as a performing arts

Restoring the Invisible Landscape: Principles from Washington Parks and People

- Start with the kids—ask them what they would like to see in a park.
- Don't allow bureaucracy and red tape to discourage you; your plans can rally people around the park.
- Learn what's good about a place. Start by mapping the assets.
- Hold meetings in the park whenever possible.
- Find the people who care and form alliances with them and foster cooperation among them. For example, the Korean Grocers' Association

was happy to provide food for an early meeting of the Watts Branch Park campaign.

- Listen to stories from the past and glean suggestions for the future.
- Make creativity—not money—the basis of your start-up efforts.
- Ask nearby residents what they want to see, and encourage them to think big. As a guiding principle, Coleman quotes Goethe: "Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it."
- Do the thing that's fragile and unexpected—plant pansies, hold a concert, stage an art exhibit; make the park a showcase for local talent of all kinds.

SHARED WISDOM

by Friends of Meridian Hill to other communities inside and outside the District of Columbia—a demand that emerged as soon as word of the revitalization of Meridian Hill began to spread.

In October of that year, Washington Parks and People moved into a derelict 18,000 square-foot, 40-room Renaissance-revival mansion that overlooks the park. Although beautiful, the 1927 building was a white elephant heading into foreclosure. With permission of the owners, Parks and People became legal squatters—its main charge being to keep looters out of the building. On Christmas Day, 1998, it brought in 125 volunteers to begin cleanup and restoration efforts. Just as the group had done in the park, Parks and People started to work without promise of funding and with few resources except volunteers.


But volunteer labor proved a concrete asset. The building's immediate needs had been addressed, and by the first week of 1999, the group had several partners ready to lease office space in the



Coleman greets a long-time resident as she passes through Watts Branch.

building—something private developers had failed to achieve. Based on the work Parks and People had already accomplished and the commitment of interested tenants, the group was able to secure a loan to purchase the building.


Now called the Josephine Butler Center after an early leader



House Mouse

Here is one mouse that every house should have. This Hunza Mouse Lite is made of cast bronze to give a pleasing, unobtrusive look by day and bring a garden wall or column alive at night. Hunza figures are engineered in New Zealand to the highest quality standards. Contact us now for the name of your local representative.

HUNZA LIGHTING USA
Phone: 310 560 7310 Web: www.hunza.co.nz
Email: frank.davis@hunzalightingusa.com



CIRCLE 89 ON READER SERVICE CARD OR GO TO WWW.ASLA.ORG/FREEINFO.HTML

Concrete Designs



Planters



Tables



Bollards



Litter Receptacles



Benches

Doty&Sons
Concrete Products, Inc.
1275 E State St.
Sycamore, IL 60178
Toll Free: 1-800-233-3907
Fax: (815)-895-8035
www.dotyconcrete.com
info@dotyconcrete.com

CIRCLE 89 ON READER SERVICE CARD OR GO TO WWW.ASLA.ORG/FREEINFO.HTML



Poster-sized photographs of Watts Branch users, like this one by Cindy Golden, were mounted on foamcore and displayed throughout the park. "It was an instant art exhibit," Coleman explains. "People loved it."

of the Meridian Hill group, the mansion is a "greenhouse" for advancing Washington's parks and public spaces. The center currently houses 12 community-based nonprofit cultural and service organizations. "We think of the building as an in-

"These people deserve the same as any other people, but just throwing money at [the situation] isn't necessary."

door park," Coleman says. "Every organization housed here commits to use parks in their outreach efforts." Parks and People also rents the more formal spaces for weddings and events and has started an in-house catering company. These efforts create jobs in the community and a positive cash flow for the group.

The Washington Parks and People staff has grown to seven, including planner and landscape designer Ian Tyndall. A former partner of Dan Kiley, FASLA,

Tyndall has taught landscape design at the University of Pennsylvania and Harvard. Before coming to work for Parks and People, Tyndall's former firm, Symbiosis, produced the master plan for the group's current focus—Watts Branch Park.

LIFETIME Vinyl

- 26 Kits Available
- Easy to Install
- White, Tan, Gray
- Lifetime Warranty
- Ship from East & West Coast Plants
- Attractively Priced
- Engineered

LANDSCAPE 2005 PROGRAM

Gazebos & Pergola Kits
CUSTOM STRUCTURES TOO

Toll Free (877) **933-6846**
www.finylvinyllbp.com

Finyl Vinyl
Building Products
"Made in the USA"

CIRCLE 71 ON READER SERVICE CARD OR GO TO WWW.ASLA.ORG/FREEINFO.HTML

The Art of Lightscaping

Call us today toll free at **1.800.727.5483** or visit us at www.coppermoon.com

CopperMoon

CIRCLE 49 ON READER SERVICE CARD OR GO TO WWW.ASLA.ORG/FREEINFO.HTML

SHARED WISDOM

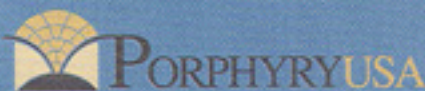
He characterizes his job with the nonprofit as "a little like working for a design/build firm or what I imagine working for a design/build firm would be like. It's very hands-on," he elaborates. "You get involved in fund-raising and permitting and meeting the community. It's a more complete submersion in the process than most landscape architects get."

When I visited the Parks and People office, Tyndall was working with landscape architect Aaron Teeter, Associate ASLA, to design one of the park's many entrances. Tyndall says that his experience on the project taught him "how to listen to people who generally don't have a very loud voice, compared to those from more privileged backgrounds—not only to listen more closely, but also to look more closely at what they want and what they need." Tyndall says he has learned how to "think a little more about economy of means and how we can do something nice, that's not too ostentatious and not too cheap, but just right." He continues, "These people deserve the same as any other people, but just throwing money at [the situation] isn't necessary."



Although the group brings in funding, money is not what Parks and People is all about. "Our mission is very simple: Reconnect people with the land and use the land to reconnect people with each other," Coleman says. Frequently, bridging that disconnect means overcoming the hopelessness of citizens and the apathy of their leaders.

"So often, people are fatalistic about these forgotten green



World leader in porphyry stone with more than fifty years of experience and proprietary quarries. Best and widest variety of porphyry products and services.

PORPHYRY USA, Inc. • 7945 MacArthur Boulevard, Suite #220
CABIN JOHN, MD 20818 • Tel: (301) 229 8725 • Fax: (301) 229 8739
web site: www.porphyrystone.com • e-mail: pavers@porphyrystone.com

CIRCLE 152 ON READER SERVICE CARD OR GO TO WWW.ASLA.ORG/FREEINFO.HTML



KENNETH LYNCH & SONS, INC.

TRADITIONAL CRAFTSMEN

Classic

These are but a few of more than 5000 unique products you'll find in our catalogue: *The Book of Garden Ornament - Millennium 2001 Edition*. Benches, Fountains, Pools, Sculpture & Statuary, Planters, Urns, Topiary, Sundials, Weathervanes and more; plus ideas, spec & sitework suggestions. Send \$15.00 for your copy today. A current price list is included.

Please note:
Books are shipped by UPS.
P.O. Box numbers are not acceptable.



84 DANBURY ROAD, P.O. BOX 488 • WILTON, CT 06897-0488

Tel: (203) 762-8363 Fax: (203) 762-2999 • Email: info@klynchandsons.com

Visit Our WEBSITE at: WWW.KLYNCHANDSONS.COM

CIRCLE 103 ON READER SERVICE CARD OR GO TO WWW.ASLA.ORG/FREEINFO.HTML



Coleman is shown above with John Campbell of Campbell's Barbershop, the unofficial community center of the Watts Branch stream valley. Lady Bird Johnson visited Watts Branch Park in 1966 to launch the urban phase of her beautification campaign. A revitalized Lady Bird Meadows is shown in the rendering opposite.

spaces," Coleman says. "You need to do the surprising, visible thing on the ground to get people energized about what's possible." Parks and People uses a "stone soup" strategy of revital-

"So often, people are fatalistic about these forgotten green spaces. You need to do the surprising, visible thing on the ground to get people energized about what's possible."

ization that takes advantage of the hidden assets available in every community and every park to get things moving in the right direction. Although the non-profit has been successful at fund-raising, its approach relies on ingenuity first and money second. "Look for noncash assets and other kinds of power," Coleman recommends. "Do an asset map—look for what's right about the place, what's working."

With Watts Branch Park, an assortment of green spaces along a stream system that feeds the Anacostia River, the group members

BAMBOO

Offering a large variety of quality container-grown bamboo for interior and exterior applications. Hundreds of specimens and sizes available—shade-acclimated to your specifications. Ask about our bamboo containment system.



New England Bamboo Company
978-546-3581
www.newengbamboo.com

CIRCLE 133 ON READER SERVICE CARD OR GO TO WWW.ASLA.ORG/FREEINFO.HTML



JACK CHANDLER SCULPTOR
Design In Steel Napa Valley (707) 944-8352
Hand crafted and hand finished
www.jackchandlerdesign.com

CIRCLE 99 ON READER SERVICE CARD OR GO TO WWW.ASLA.ORG/FREEINFO.HTML

SHARED WISDOM

started as they did at Meridian Hill—by entering the park and saying hello. For decades, the neighborhoods in the valley along this stream carried more than their fair share of the municipal burden, hosting the city's dump and trash incinerator, for example, and accommodating a methadone clinic that attracted dealers as well as users to its greenspaces. Although this area has the second highest concentration of children in the city, anxious parents warned their children to stay away from the park, even though many of them were forced to cross it to get to school.

Parks and People began brainstorming with the kids, asking them what they would like to see in the park. Surprisingly, they suggested trash cans. "That's not much of a dream," Parks and People gently chided the children. The kids insisted it was; after all, not a single trash receptacle sat in the park. Based on their own observations, the children believed that getting the cans would prove an impossible task.



Put up a sign and watch it happen. Coleman stands by a mosaic generated through Washington Parks and People's volunteer-based Art on the Block project.

Their instincts were right: It *was* difficult. But two years later, 24 heavily used cans are spaced along the streambank.

Even the thriving heroin market represented untapped potential to Parks and People. "We realized this needle park was an

KEVIN MAZUR

DOORS • GATES • RAILING • LIGHTINGS • SCULPTURES
FREDERIC ZIMMER
 808-845-8060 • 808-222-5806
 www.fredericzimmer.com

CIRCLE 69 ON READER SERVICE CARD OR GO TO WWW.ASLA.ORG/FREEINFO.HTML

NATURAL SOIL PAVEMENT.

For Natural Looking Roads, Parking Lots, and Paths that are stronger than asphalt, cost less and are practically maintenance-free: Just add PolyPavement™ and water.

- Environmentally Friendly
- Prevents Dust, Erosion, Mud & Vegetation
- Tested and Recommended by the US Army Corps of Engineers

PolyPavement

The Natural Soil Pavement
 PolyPavement Company • P.O. Box 36339, Los Angeles, California 90036
 Telephone: (323) 954-2240 Fax: (323) 954-2244 Website: www.poly-pavement.com

CIRCLE 150 ON READER SERVICE CARD OR GO TO WWW.ASLA.ORG/FREEINFO.HTML

asser," Coleman explains. "The park's a gathering place, and people are buying things, so something must be working. If dealers can do something illegal and unsafe there, then we thought we should be able to do something that's healthy and legal. So we decided to operate a farm stand with children (who work at a nearby youth garden) to raise people's sights about what was possible. We put up signs announcing that it was coming."

The market was extremely successful because it addressed several community needs simultaneously—driving the drug dealers out of the park and providing fresh vegetables in an area that is multiple bus trips away from the nearest supermarket. "Criminals take the path of least resistance," Coleman notes. "There is nothing more shocking or frightening to them than to see children selling cucumbers in a place they think belongs to them. This one simple act did more than years of police and politicians to clean up the park."

Since beginning the Watts Branch Park campaign in 2001, Parks and People has removed 1,900 tires, 6,000 needles, and 18,000 bags of garbage. It has towed 68 abandoned cars and trucks, hauled out over 2,000,000 pounds of bulk trash and debris, and planted 325 native trees and hundreds of flowers. The vast majority of this work was accomplished by multiracial groups of volunteers—just as was done at Meridian Hill. Now the community has two miles of cleared trail, stream,

"Criminals take the path of least resistance. There is nothing more shocking or frightening to them than to see children selling cucumbers in a place they think belongs to them."

and streambank to enjoy. Crime is dramatically reduced, and the park is perceived as a much safer place. In 2003, the group was asked to manage Watts Branch on contract with the D.C. Department of Parks and Recreation. Now the organization acts as neighbor and employer as well as friend to people near the park.

Parks and People has set about recovering the invisible landscape as well. Local storytellers were located and listened to. Their memories of being baptized in the stream, of watching possum, beavers, and other small mammals frolic in more ecologically sound days, and of hearing Martin Luther King Jr. speak in the park have been tapped as a source of inspiration. After learning that in 1961 King had spoken in a field along the stream, for example, Parks and People set about preserving the location as the King Nature Sanctuary. "Don't look for the official address of the community center," Coleman advises. "Listen to what people say and find out where things happen and who knows about the place. A dream has to come from something that they have already." After learning that musician

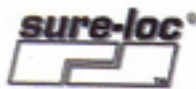
art
in aluminum form.



professional grade
aluminum landscape edging by sure-loc

In the world of landscaping, there is only one edging that incorporates both art and science – sure-loc edging. With its seamless connections, deep grooves to withstand frost heave and unmatched quality, no other edging can boast such performance. You design a beautiful landscape, let us retain your intent for a lifetime.

sure-loc has patent pending end stake adaptors, a dual stake locking system, no overlapping joints, wide stakes, and deep grooves to ensure edging stays in place.



surelocedging.com accept no other.™ call 1.800.787.3562

CIRCLE 174 ON READER SERVICE CARD OR GO TO WWW.ASLA.ORG/FREEINFO.HTML

All-Sports
Misting Station
Model 530SMSS



Most Dependable Fountains, Inc.™
800-552-6331
www.mostdependable.com

CIRCLE 131 ON READER SERVICE CARD OR GO TO WWW.ASLA.ORG/FREEINFO.HTML

SHARED WISDOM

Marvin Gaye grew up in the neighborhood and played his first gig at a lounge across the street from one of the park's many entrances. Parks and People was determined to mine that musical resource. Just like that, the Marvin Gaye Amphitheater was born.

Parks and People located a spot in a troublesome area of the park and put up a sign that read, "Future Site of the Marvin Gaye Amphitheater." Soon, another sign went up advertising a talent show. "If you have music, even if all you have is an open mike—you have an event," Coleman says. "We didn't have any talent, but we had a mike." The result was "an instant talent show" that was covered by the *Washington Post*. When a foundation in Minnesota read about it, it contacted Parks and People and ultimately contributed \$20,000 toward construction of the performance space. Now the amphitheater is a permanent part of the new master plan that Parks and People is developing for Watts Branch Park.

Watts Branch Park is an even bigger challenge than Meridian Hill was, but by building expansive circles of partnerships, Parks and People feels up to the task. In addition to the amphitheater, the group purchased and is refurbishing the old Crystal Lounge, where young Gaye made his debut, as a park-side community center, restaurant, and off-site catering facility for the Butler Center. Already, jobs have been created through the cleanup effort, and more will come through the restaurant. The master plan Parks and People has created at Watts Branch has "really galvanized other city agencies," Coleman notes. Although the area was receiving a third of a billion dollars in various kinds of public funding, none of that money was being used in a coordinated fashion. With Watts Branch as a focal point, community leaders and local development organizations are working together as never before. In fact, the city's mayor is expected to announce a name change any day now:

Coleman is unapologetic about the power of parks to transform lives and neighborhoods. "We need to have passion about public space," he says.

Watts Branch Park will become Marvin Gaye Park.

Already, the dozen or so public schools in the area have been involved in cleanup, planting, and programming. Eventually Parks and People would like to see local schools use the park as a resource in every area of their curricula. The group has brought in students from the design departments of local universities to give school-age children a glimpse into their not-too-distant futures. "There are real jobs and real careers in the land," Coleman says of the effort to involve students of all ages in bringing back Watts Branch. "There are tremendous opportunities here to get African American kids into the fields of landscape architecture and urban design."

"If we go into a park and people say we are crazy, then we know we are in the right space," Coleman reflects. He is unapologetic about Parks and People's exuberance over the power of parks to transform lives and neighborhoods. "We need to have passion about public space," he says. "This is life—it's not an academic thing. I believe we are making a difference in every single major urban challenge—whether it's abandonment of areas, dropout rates, teen pregnancy, or public health problems from obesity to addiction. Fundamentally, bridging this disconnection between people and the environment is something that can address every one of those problems. And we are doing it."

Remember, it all begins by saying hello and maybe putting up a sign or two.