

Soar Park Takes Off

Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor
February 2016

Smart local partnering sends this old park to new heights



ong before World War II, the Shuffleboard World Championships were held in Little River. Each season during the sport's heyday, French-Canadian participants stayed in winter digs next door at a quaint mobile-home park.

By 1954, according to public information officer Laura Phillips of Miami-Dade County's Parks, Recreation, and Open Spaces, the heirs of Francis M. Soar, the original owner of the shuffleboard court property, leased the 3.09 acres to the City of Miami, with a restrictive covenant that the land be used for public park purposes.

Soar Memorial Park, as it was known at the time, dedicated a community house in 1956 adjacent to the concrete courts.

Today Soar Park is a different place. Gone are vacationing Canadians and shuffleboard tournaments. The nearby mobile home park is a patchwork of sheet metal, chickens, and loose dogs. In April 2015, says Phillips, Miami-Dade County (the lessee of the parkland since 1967) demolished and sodded over the old courts, work financed by the county's Building Better Communities program, a \$2.9 billion bond issue passed by Miami-Dade voters in 2004.

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The long-vacant community house has been restored and now serves local Haitian seniors. With a \$350,000 renovated kitchen, the new Soar Senior Center at 100 NW 83rd Street opened in April 2014, thanks to the Parks Department partnering with Miami-Dade Community Action and Human Services Department (CAHSD).



This brick building is one of several designated CAHSD senior centers in the county that, according to center coordinator Patrick Sainti, provide hot meals, fitness programs, art classes, special activities, and trips for seniors. A laptop nook offers online access, and a cozy recreation room, filled with recliners, features flat-screen TV viewing during the day; the outreach post keeps area seniors engaged.

Behind the center, Sainti planted a garden of medicinal herbs and spices for tea, providing visitors with a taste of back home. Jasmine, basil, sugar cane, lemongrass, and peppermint are harvested there, as well as papaya, yams, and lemons.

West of the senior center is a small playground. Sun-faded plastic equipment sits on flooring surfaces of half-sand, half-crumbling rubber mats. Stray dogs hang out by new green metal benches -- the site of fatal drive-by shootings in 2014. Sgt. John Barrow, public information officer for Miami-Dade Police, states that although this crime is still unsolved, the department doesn't consider Soar Park to be a high-crime area.

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On the southwestern corner of the park sits a dandy basketball court, paid for in 2006 by the Quality Neighborhood Improvement Program, Safe Neighborhood Program, and capital outlay reserves, says Phillips. She points out that renovations continue at Soar.



“Improvements to access-control fencing, landscaping, and a new Dumpster enclosure began in early December 2015,” she adds, “and are expected to be complete in February of this year,” costing \$120,000 and funded by again by Building Better Communities.

If anyone visits Soar Park and fails to notice what’s going on at the remodeled facility on its northwestern edge, they’re missing out on what’s best about Soar. In the summer of 2013, the county turned over the vacant and neglected building located at 120 NW 83rd St. to the nonprofit Little Haiti Optimist Club. By that September, with the help of community business partners, they’d turned it into a vibrant center for education and recreational opportunities called Little Haiti Optimist Club Tech and Youth Center.

Serving the mixed neighborhood of first- and second-generation Haitians and Latinos, and African Americans, the center boasts a tech lounge and spacious classroom. The tech center helps community teens and adults with résumé writing and job searches, giving them Internet access Monday through Friday on several computer stations.

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The youth center is next door in a bustling room of activity for kids in grades K-8. All afternoon youngsters trickle in for after-school programs in the arts, sports, computer science, even engineering. A kitchen provides nutritional sustenance for their bodies, while 20 new MacBook computers, donated by Rafael Marrero & Co. and Mayda Barsumyan of Business Escalation, feed their hungry minds.



According to Little Haiti Optimist Club president and founder Marie Louissant (a volunteer), local businesses and volunteers have played crucial partnering roles in making improvements at the Tech and Youth Center. Home Depot was a major donor in the renovation project, and more recently resurfaced the basketball court and re-netted rims. Courtyard benches, picnic tables, and the community garden were created in one day by 100 volunteers, Miami law firm Bilzin Sumberg, and the United Way. Artist Gerry Stecca designed a massive, Haiti-inspired “Tree of Life” mural that was executed on the back wall with the help of volunteers.

Barry University and FIU School of Medicine students have led science projects, such as animal organ dissection and robotics engineering, at the center; and computers are a big part of the education programs.

“The center is beneficial because it will help narrow the digital divide we have in our community,” says District 2 county Commissioner Jean Monestime in a 2014 video about the new facility. “It’s a step in the right direction.”

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That's happening not only because of generous donations and volunteering, but because of dedicated staff, like Angela Burns, the center's director. With her enthusiasm and big dreams for her kids, she embodies the center's enthusiasm for learning.



"We definitely have a very bright future," she says. "We've been doing an excellent job thus far providing services in the community, and we only want that to grow. We want to add more services to our tech center -- more computer classes to help people in the community, language classes to help people learn English, more resources for finding jobs. We want to make our garden bigger and more awesome."

This month, the youth center is planning a history exhibit to highlight the students' ancestral countries.

"Our spring focus," says Burns, "is on computer science coding. We already have a team that put together the curriculum, and our new computers are ready to go. The kids want to go back to Grapeland Water Park, and a solar energy plant invited us to visit and learn about clean energy."

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This ambitious spirit is making Soar Park the place to soar.

Feedback: letters@biscaynetimes.com



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100-120 NW 83rd St.
Miami, FL 33150
786-469-4610

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Park Rating



□

Hours: □ Sunrise to Sunset

Picnic Tables	: Yes
Barbecues	: Yes
Picnic pavilions	: No
Tennis courts	: No
Athletic fields	: Basketball Court
Night lighting	: Yes
Swimming pool	: No
Exercise equipment	: Yes
Playground	: Yes