



Kirby Lane Park
Image Credit: Nature Sacred

Kirby Lane Park

By Alden E. Stoner, CEO, Nature Sacred

The open yet cluttered lot on West Saratoga street in Southwest Baltimore was not unlike thousands of others dotting city streets in struggling, often red-lined neighborhoods throughout the country. It had become a dumping ground, a gathering place – but not for children or families. Yet, children and families would walk past it, many hurriedly, daily on their way to work and school in this area of the city that many have described

as a green space desert. Sites like this, scientists have proven, are an actual [detriment to human health](#) (de Leon and Schilling 2017).

But that was before.

Today, not a trace of the discarded toilet seats, crushed drywall and other garbage that marred the space remains. This patch of ground has experienced a rebirth. Now

called Kirby Lane Park, it is a locus for the community where milestones like graduations are celebrated; children squeal and scramble over newly-installed playground equipment while adults play horseshoes – and people pause for a peaceful, restorative moment of reflection in nature. This park is now, finally, a reflection of the community that it holds; a community that now, unbidden, helps tend the park and keep it clean. This type

of engagement and life, though, isn't a given when parks and green spaces are created.

A key difference between Kirby Lane Park and other converted lots is the way in which it came about, and this difference can be a determining factor in how public green spaces such as this fare in the long-term.

Just as our understanding of the nature-health connection has become more nuanced in recent years, so too has our awareness of the community dynamics that are the greatest factor determining the future of newly-established parks or green spaces. If we want to see more thriving community green spaces that, like Kirby Lane Park, draw the community in, then deep and deliberate community engagement is a must. This engagement is nothing less than a collective exercise in a bespoke public health and wellness intervention.

Without it, a landscape architect would likely never have thought to include a space for playing a game of horseshoes. This one design detail - conceived by community members - was the X factor for Kirby Lane that drew the community into the space before construction was even completed.

Perhaps one of the most overlooked and minimized phases of greenspace design, a structured approach to community engagement should be considered foundational. **Community canvassing, invitations to participate,**

collective ideation and planning session, stakeholder sign-off; these all are key components of a well-designed community engagement strategy. This is the case regardless of whether the green space is at a hospital or in an under-resourced and disenfranchised neighborhood; but in the latter case, early engagement is critical. And the coming together and planning itself can seed an atmosphere of togetherness and community that impacts how the park is embraced from the very beginning.

No one can speak to the creation of Kirby Lane Park better than neighborhood resident Donald Quarles, “block captain” and Firesoul of the Sacred Place that is nestled inside the park. Quarles was integral to the transformation of the space; a decades-long resident of the neighborhood, he witnessed firsthand the troubles and struggles that manifested in an outward decline of the neighborhood. He innately understood the role this small

space of vacant land could play in the mending of his community. Quarles himself has described this park as a healing park - a serenity space - a place for adults to come to find healing for their “hurts, habits and hang-ups.” And this is precisely the purpose of Sacred Places; to give people a place to connect with and heal in nature.

Proof of the depth of this park's impact on the people it serves has already been captured in a weatherproof yellow journal tucked beneath the Nature Sacred bench at the center of the space. Sometimes mundane, other times profound – the musings left on these pages show us, in the community's own words, nature's impact on one's thoughts, feelings and emotions.

Nature Sacred has collected thousands of these journal entries over the past quarter century, many of which were left in journals in the 30-plus other Sacred Places, all open and green, that can be found networked around Baltimore.



After
Photo by Harry Conolly



The Kirby Lane Park story is one that cities across the US and around the world can learn from. The park's restoration is a community-led initiative with a profound purpose: to address the health and wellness of the people who call this neighborhood, this park, home.

The body of research around the integral role nature plays in the health of both individuals and communities is vast and sound. However, moving this science into the realm of public practice still faces hurdles. Since last March and the initial lockdown, though, we have seen the national narrative shift from nature being an amenity to a necessity to it being utterly essential.

While the conversation is shifting, implementation and funding has some room to catch up. If we were to invest in green spaces, ensuring people had a place to gather and just be in nature, we would surely obviate,

in part, untold trips to the doctor. Case in point: roughly 12 percent of ER visits are made by people seeking help for depressive symptoms. We have empirical data showing how converting a blighted lot into a space like Kirby Lane Park [lowers symptoms of depression](#) in those who live nearby (South et al. 2018).

While the re-imagining of Kirby Lane Park was community-driven, the transformation was made possible by Bon Secours Health System - which has long been addressing health disparities in Baltimore through broad-based initiatives that address the lack of affordable housing and other essential social services. It was Bon Secours that invited Nature Sacred, along with multiple other organizations, into the project. Kirby Lane Park is one of four similar biophilic projects Nature Sacred is currently collaborating with Bon Secours on to bring Sacred Places – contemplative healing nature – to Southwest Baltimore, and to neighborhoods

nationwide where the need is particularly dire.

Daniel Greenspan, manager of Community Design & Engagement, Department of Housing and Community Development, Bon Secours Community Works says: "As a healthcare organization, we understand that there are a multitude of factors that contribute to the happiness and health of communities – one of which is access to cherished green spaces in communities which oftentimes have insufficient nature access to gather, play, and seek respite." According to Greenspan, "Through partnership and collaboration, together, we create distinctive community-designed spaces that foster holistic wellbeing and dignity."

It's rare to identify one form of intervention - as simple as nearby nature - that can have such a marked impact on such a broad and varied range of societal issues - from crime to individual health to the environment. Yet that's exactly what Kirby Lane Park has achieved.

Alden E. Stoner is CEO of Nature Sacred. For over to two decades, she has focused on mobilizing organizations and the public around social issues, films, Fortune 500 brands, and start-ups. Alden holds a dual Masters in Global Media and Communication from USC and the London School of Economics.

Resources:

de Leon, Erwin, and Schilling, Joseph (April 2017). Urban Blight and Public Health Addressing the Impact of Substandard Housing, Abandoned Buildings, and Vacant Lots. Research Report. *Urban Institute*. Available at https://www.urban.org/research/publication/urban-blight-and-public-health/view/full_report.

Nature Sacred. <https://naturesacred.org>.

South, Eugenia C., Hohl, Bernadette C., Kondo, Michelle C. et al. (2018). Effect of Greening Vacant Land on Mental Health of Community-Dwelling Adults. *JAMA Netw Open*. 1(3):e180298. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2018.0298.



Firesoul and Block Captain Donald Quarles is pictured in Kirby Lane Park
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