

A place for healing

Cully neighborhood celebrates the opening of Portland's first Native Gathering Garden

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Along one edge of Northeast Portland's Thomas Cully Park, prairie grasses sway and softly crackle in the breeze. Shaved tree trunks, tall and straight, border a graveled circular open space where the local Native American community will have a place to gather for celebrations and ceremony.

Thomas Cully Park, more commonly known as Cully Park, opened to the public on June 30 and is the site of Portland's first Native Gathering Garden, a combined garden and open community space for the Native community to experience and carry out cultural practices.

Building and opening Cully Park took nearly 10 years of community advocacy, fundraising and planning and is the result of a years-long, grassroots, neighborhood-level environmental justice movement that has championed the priorities and needs of the racial and ethnic minorities who live in the Cully neighborhood.



Cully Park, 25 acres in size, is on the site of a former landfill in the Cully neighborhood, located in Northeast Portland directly south of the airport.

It is the second park to open in the neighborhood, which is the most racially and ethnically diverse neighborhood in all of Oregon. According to census figures, more than half of the neighborhood's residents are African-American, Latinx, Native American, or immigrants or refugees from Africa and Asia.

Cully is also the lowest-income neighborhood in Portland, with the median income \$10,000 less than the city's average. That poverty is manifested in the neighborhood's historic lack of basic infrastructure: Many streets remain unpaved and more than half the neighborhood's streets do not have sidewalks.

The creation of Cully Park is a "significant victory" for Cully's residents, given the neighborhood's history and dearth of infrastructure, said Tony DeFalco, the executive director of Verde, a nonprofit that promotes environmental justice.

"It's a significant victory in terms of both of what it did physically, it transformed this landfill into a park," DeFalco said. "But it's also a victory in terms of showing how communities like ours, low-income and

people of color, can take charge of their own destiny when it comes to making their neighborhood better.

"This landfill was built right up to people's backyards in the 1980s," he said. "It shows you that company didn't care. The city didn't care. The state didn't care. To come full circle and say 'no, we're going to have an asset, rather than a liability in our neighborhood.' That's justice."

Cully Park is the capstone of numerous projects that Living Cully, a coalition of nonprofits that includes Verde, Hacienda CDC and Native American Youth and Family Center (NAYA), has undertaken to reduce poverty in Cully.

The philosophy of Living Cully, which has existed since 2010, is that environmental and sustainability projects can create equity – not only through building bike lanes in an underserved community, but also through creating jobs for minority-owned businesses and residents of the neighborhood.

Among other projects, the coalition, in 2015, bought the notorious Sugar Shack, a former strip club now known as Living Cully Plaza and the future site of 150 units of affordable housing. And, in 2016, it saved the Oak Leaf mobile home park from being sold to a developer. Living Cully has strongly advocated for increasing the number of bike lanes, sidewalks, bioswales and other green infrastructure on Cully's streets.

Another way the coalition creates access is through language and speaking. Many events Living Cully sponsors are bilingual, with English-Spanish interpreters and speakers, ensuring that the neighborhood's Hispanic and Latino residents can participate equally.

Cully Park's opening celebration June 30, which drew hundreds of people from Cully, nearby neighborhoods and the entire city, was no different – speakers either spoke Spanish or their words were translated into Spanish.

"Cully Park is ... about a community claiming its rightful share of economic, educational and environmental benefits," Alan Hipólito, Verde's former executive director said during the opening celebration. "To say that Cully's residents felt thrilled that the park has opened is an understatement. 'I feel blessed,' DeFalco said on the day of the park's opening, nearly in tears.

"We are so glad to see this one. It's nice. Beautiful. We are so happy," Fakiya Omer, 30, a Cully resident and Ethiopian immigrant, said.



Omer often takes her 2-year-old daughter to Peninsula Park and other parks miles from her home. "It's so far away," she said.

She watched her daughter walk on the playground as she spoke, saying her daughter often becomes bored staying at home all day. She and her sister planned to bring their kids to Cully Park often. "We can walk," she said. "It's really exciting."

Omer, who is Muslim, also said she and her family might come to the park to pray or celebrate future Ramadans, the Muslim holiday of fasting, at the park.



Community and the value of advocacy were at the forefront of people's minds and words throughout the park's opening celebration, for without both, Cully Park may not exist.

When Portland Parks & Recreation bureau bought the land Cully Park now sits on in 2002, the city did not fund the park's construction.

The Let Us Build Cully Park! coalition, which included Living Cully, Cully Association of Neighborhoods and a host of other nonprofits and individuals, was formed and ceaselessly advocated for the park's construction and fundraising.

Verde, which led the coalition, raised more than \$7 million. Starting in 2014, the City of Portland began allocating funding toward the park's construction, which ended

up totaling \$6 million.

Designing and building the park was a community effort. According to DeFalco, 70 percent of all wages paid for the park's construction went to businesses owned by women and minorities, and 10 percent of those wages were paid to people who live in Cully.

Cully residents were involved in many aspects of the park's design. Students from Harvey Scott Elementary School gave input on the design of the community garden and the playground.

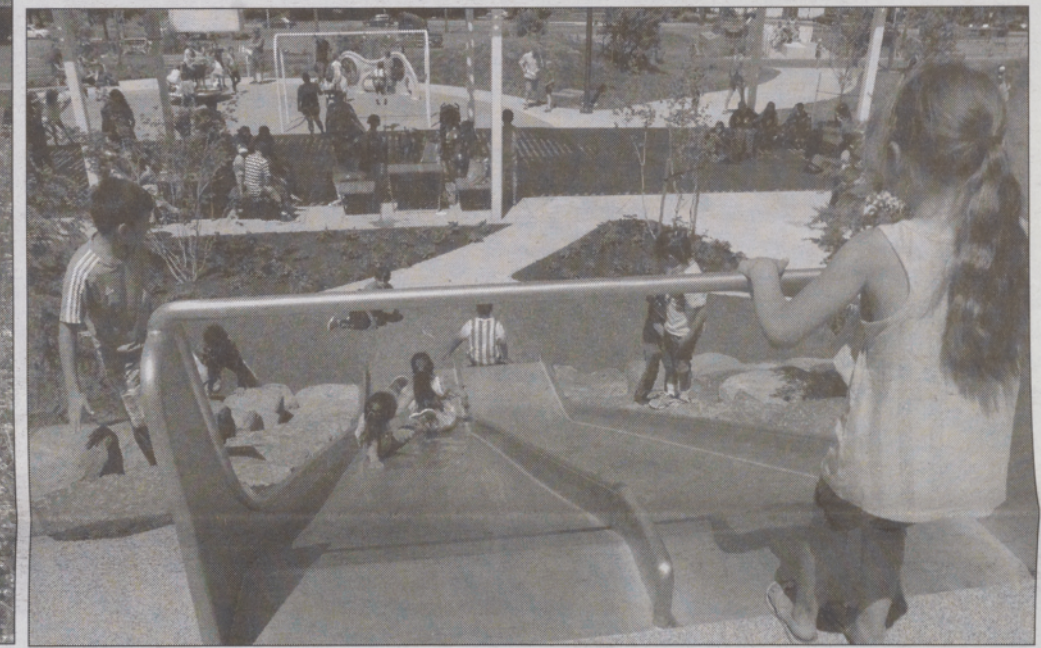
And the Native Gathering Garden would not exist without the advocacy and involvement of hundreds of Native American Portlanders.

The original proposal for the Native Gathering Garden would have been a space 20,000 square feet in size, with informational signs about plants and vegetation significant to Native culture – much like a museum exhibit or educational programming in other outdoor spaces, said Shawna Zierdt, a member of the Cow Creek tribe and who oversaw the public outreach related to the Gathering Garden.

But after intensive engagement with the Native American community, the concept for the Gathering Garden radically changed, from 20,000 square feet to eight acres and to space far more reflective of Native culture and customs.

The overarching desire for the Gathering Garden, Zierdt said, is "to access cultural traditions, even in an urban setting."

The Seed Ceremony (at left) took place at the Native Gathering Garden during Cully Park's grand opening on Saturday, June 30. Shawna Zierdt (top right), a member of the Cow Creek tribe who oversaw the public outreach for the Gathering Garden stands with Judy Bluehorse, an assistant professor of Indigenous Nations Studies at Portland State University. Children (bottom right) enjoy the slide at the new Cully neighborhood park.



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ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF INDIGENOUS NATIONS STUDIES AT PORTLAND STATE UNIVERSITY

grows in oak savannahs, the bulb of which is edible – Oregon grape, alder trees, lupine, tarweed, nodding onion – another edible plant – hawthorn and hazelnut trees.

LaCourse said the plants in the garden were chosen for numerous reasons, including their historical use by Native people as food, medicine or other cultural purposes.

Other factors included what plants could grow on the site – as Cully Park was being built, tons of top soil were added to the site, to cover the former landfill and adhere to environmental regulations. In some places, the soil is 18 inches deep, LaCourse said, limiting the kind of plants that will grow. The Gathering Garden is also on a hill, exposing plants to more wind and sun.

Over time, parts of the Gathering Garden will be forested and other parts will be grassier and more open, like a prairie. When speaking about the significance of the Gathering Garden as the first such space in Portland, Zierdt and others were almost at a lost for words.

"The significance is that it exists, period," Zierdt said. "That there's space made here for people whose culture is tied to this place

since time immemorial ... that our connection to plants is still relevant today."

Portland Parks & Recreation now plans to create gathering gardens in other parks throughout the city. Those efforts are just beginning, but LaCourse said the process that led to the creation of the Native Gathering Garden in Cully Park has set the course.

"The model is perseverance and continued engagement and keeping that long-term vision alive," she said.



Speaking during a seed spreading ceremony at the garden on the day of the park's opening, Judy Bluehorse, an assistant professor of Indigenous Nations Studies at Portland State University, said the garden is ultimately about healing.

"A healing of the land. It's also about reconciliation," she said. "To heal the land is to heal the people. We've heard the elected officials remind us of separation of (immigrant) families. One hundred fifty years ago, the country was doing that to indigenous people right here."

Healing was emphasized during a seed gathering ceremony, on the day of the park's opening, which allowed participants to scatter seeds throughout the garden.

The ceremony began with a procession from the opening ceremony, on a large field, to the Native Gathering Garden, led by members of the Portland All Nations Canoe Family, an intertribal group connected by canoeing and a relationship to water.

"These seeds are healing," Lukas Angus, said during the ceremony. "When we plant these seeds, the world changes."

Angus, who is a member of the Canoe Family and of Nez Perce, Tlingit and Haida descent, led the procession. He was followed by dozens of Native American people with 100 or more people behind them, walking to the slow, steady beats of drums and singing. They sang a paddle song with lyrics written by Angus' daughter, which would be sung while paddling in a canoe.

When the procession gathered on top of the hill overlooking the rest of the Gathering Garden, the group finished singing. The drumming ceased. LaCourse encouraged everyone to spread the seeds "with good thoughts and intentions."

Dozens of adults and children took handfuls of seeds and dirt, scattering and tossing the seeds throughout the garden.

It was the first time that Angus had seen the garden. "It was good to be here," he said.