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## Back to Life

### Owen Park receives a much-needed facelift in hopes of attracting a new flock of patrons

BY *KATIE SULLIVAN*

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The volleyball court is overgrown with thick patches of grass. The wooden horseshoe backboards are rotted and dismantled. The tennis courts have not been maintained in more than seven years and will be torn down. City workers are still cleaning the grounds since December's ice storm.

Owen Park, 560 N. Maybelle Ave., has seen better days. But its best days might lie just ahead. Tulsa Parks recently announced the reopening of the Owen Park Community Center after seven years of vacancy. Work crews slaved away cleaning the facility for two months. Now, the tiles are cleaned, every nook and cranny is dusted and just about every inch of the place is repainted. The only thing the Center needs now is people.

A grand re-opening preview night took place last Monday and another is scheduled for Thursday, August 28. The Thursday evening preview features a sample of the various community programs the center plans to offer, including rhythmic gymnastics, zumba, tap and ballet, and an open fitness room. Attendees can tour the facility and meet the staff.

The park, which happens to be Tulsa's oldest and most historic, was one of several Tulsa parks shut down years ago as a result of budget cuts and insufficient funding. Today, Tulsa Parks is giving the center back to a community in need of unity and hope. Owen Park, Crosbie Heights, Brady Heights and Skyline are the neighborhoods in the area that will benefit most from the reopening. Often deemed as "sketchy" by outsiders, the neighborhoods have all seen ramshackle and restoration. The history of the Owen Park neighborhood gives its members pride, but it's the community center's goal to take that pride and turn it into action.

**Love a Challenge**

The project fell into the hands of Vickie Henry, who formerly ran the Henthorne Park & Community Center, 4825 S. Quaker Ave. Henry's worked for the city for 28 years and understands the need for these park's community centers. As Park and Facility Manager, she welcomes the opportunity to restore Owen Park's life and vitality.

"I'm thankful for this. I love a challenge and am excited to see what I can do. The neighborhood is wanting, desiring some leisurely services. I've been working with the neighborhood associations and now we are ready to see if people will buy into it. The center is such a positive for [the community] and I want them to know that this is your building. The more you put into it, the more you will get out of it."

The facility features an auditorium, a fitness room, an arts and crafts studio, an industrial kitchen, offices and a gymnasium. Henry and the other three members of her staff used surveys, demographic studies and their experience at Henthorne to find out what types of programs the center should offer.

The current lineup of activities for September through December includes a nutritional series where participants learn about healthy dieting and cooking; a first aid and CPR education series; social activities like story time, scavenger hunts and birthday parties; arts and crafts lessons; and a widely varied fitness series. Scheduled fitness classes include tae kwon do (the teacher for the class began learning the martial art at Owen Park years ago as a young boy), free weights and chair steppers for seniors. A large portion of the lineup is dedicated to dance, gymnastics and performance arts. Classes include tap and ballet, Latin and ballroom dance, tumbling,

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"I really want to gear the programs toward middle-aged women whose kids have grown up and left the house and now it's time to get back into shape," said Henry. "They are looking for something to do. They want to be active. That's who we want to get in here."

Most of the programs are free, but some require a small monthly fee.

Henry also said she is willing to alter the schedule in order to serve those who might be interested in a particular class.

"It might take us a year to figure out the best schedule for our participants. We have to figure out not only what time works best for the largest amount of people, but also what day, what month and what season," said Henry.

The Owen Park grounds have jungle gym equipment, a splash pad, walking trails, a soccer field, a large pond, and Tulsa's oldest house.

The small wooden house sits right next to the park's main entrance. The sign in front reads: "Home of the Rev. Sylvester Morris, Tulsa Indian Territory, Methodist Minister (1836-1907)." The home is a major symbol behind the birth of Owen Park, but it isn't the most fascinating landmark on the park grounds.

As the story goes, in 1904, when Tulsa was only six years old, a farmer named McDonald was unloading more than 800 quarts of nitroglycerine on the property of Chauncey Owen. Working for the Western Torpedo Co., McDonald somehow made a grave mistake with the dumping process. The explosion obliterated McDonald and left a giant hole in the land, which soon filled with water. Without a park or central outdoor environment to congregate, Tulsans soon flocked to the area to swim and socialize with neighbors. Owen's land soon became Owen's Lake, which became Owen Park in 1909.

The story doesn't end there. In 1910, the city built Roosevelt School right next to a brick factory also located on Owen's property. The company had a large pit in the ground that it used for baking bricks. Years later, the factory closed. Like the nitroglycerine crater, the pit filled with water and school children began swimming in it until a young boy drowned in 1954. The city repurchased the land, filled the pond and eventually a large green plot of land became part of Owen Park.

The oldest house is also marked by tragedy. In 1907, it belonged to the aforementioned Rev. Sylvester Morris. Reports say that a police officer shot Morris in the back one day after he refused to show the officer his identification. The home was moved away from a freeway expansion project in 1976 to Owen Park for preservation and there it stays, "Still in Existence," as the sign in front also reads.

#### Plan to Action

Henry looks forward to working with the neighbors and neighborhood associations. As Henry put it, they are the staff's next best friend.

She has plans to contact Roosevelt Elementary School and Central High School. She wants to coordinate before and after school programs with Roosevelt and wants the art students at Central to paint murals on the community center walls.

"I'd like to see how we can work together to enhance all our programming. The principal at Roosevelt knows the children, the parents, the overall community, and working with her will be an important issue for my staff."

Getting in touch with various programs, including the Chamber of Commerce, Tulsa Young Professionals and others that exist downtown, is also on Henry's to-do list.

"I am told all the time that this particular event goes on in the downtown area and you should get involved but I am so unknowledgeable about all the activities that go on downtown, like bike rides and trails. This central location has such easy access to downtown and it's up to me and my staff to do some investigating on what is already there that we can work with."

Henry calls herself an eternal optimist. Without relying heavily on the City and its park funding, she believes in the community center 100 percent and plans to use her resources as much as she possibly can.

"You use your creativity, your contacts and your knowledge. I look at it as how do I use what I have? You won't change anything by fussing and fretting."

Henry would like to see Thursday's preview night overflowing with people. It is her chance to meet new people and expose them to the programming the center provides. This is her first attempt at marketing the reopening.

"Word of mouth is your best advertising. I had a supervisor one time tell me that there are three ways to advertise: telegraph, telephone, tell a woman. That verbal communication is a good and positive. One person will tell ten others and so on and so on."

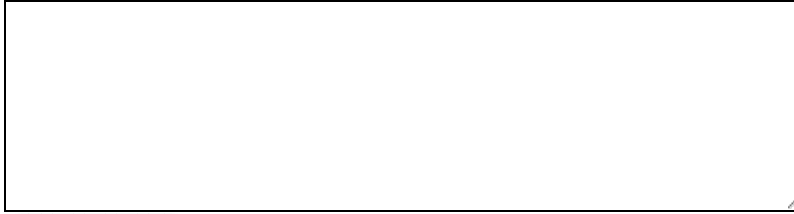
Thursday's preview night begins at 6pm at the Owen Park Community Center, 560 N. Maybelle Ave. Call 596-1485 for more details.

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