

OVERTON PARK

notes

fall 2019

Connecting with family, friends, and a healthier life in Overton Park

For Valerie and Dean Hornbeak, a dream that started four years ago came true this summer on the Overton Park Greensward. After planning, stocking up on equipment, and creating an immediately recognizable brand, they opened their Brisket in a Basket food truck and set up shop in the park three days a week.



Valerie and Dean Hornbeak of Brisket in a Basket

For native Memphian Valerie, who recently retired from FedEx after 32 years, the park is an essential element of the food truck's concept. "When I was little, it didn't take much for my family to have a picnic," she says. "We grabbed a kickball, some PB&Js, and spent the day at the park and the zoo." These happy memories inspired her to build the concept of picnicking into the food truck, which she and Dean custom-designed to include a six-foot porch where customers could sit and play board games. The truck also includes a picnic table, an umbrella, and bicycles.

The idea of serving brisket in a picnic basket was inspired by two things--Dean's mastery of brisket, a dish not commonly seen in Memphis barbecue restaurants, and a trip to Sweden taken by Valerie's daughter. She was charmed by restaurants that served

food in baskets, and Valerie saw a perfect opportunity to extend the picnic concept of the truck.

For Valerie and Dean, the vision for their business is intertwined with the closeness of their family, and the positive memories they hope to create for other families who visit the truck. Between them, they have four adult

children and four grandchildren, one of whom is pictured on the side of the truck. They serve healthy menu options, including fruit cups and vegetarian items, and none of their food is fried. Valerie prepares the side dishes and Dean cooks the brisket, which is their best-selling item.

Brisket in a Basket's first few months have been a success, Valerie says, in part because of the atmosphere of the park. "We're all about reviving family unity, and what better place to be than in the park, with bikes, games, and picnics?"

She adds, "This was personal for me. Growing up, this was *the* park. We'd clean our cars on Sundays, ride around, and people-watch. I grew up in this park. We just love it here."

continued on page 2



Don Greer and Barry Roberson

A Homecoming on the Trails

For two generations now, Memphians have been participating in the city's oldest footrace--the Overton Park Five Mile Classic. Started in 1974 by University of Memphis high jumper Don Greer and several of his fraternity brothers, the race was originally a way for high school and college athletes to tune up before the fall competition season began.

Through the decades, the race hasn't changed much--it still uses old-school manual scoring, benefits a local nonprofit (today, Overton Park Conservancy), and attracts legendary runners from around the country. Olympic medalists like Frank Shorter and Boston Marathon winners like Bill Rodgers love coming to Memphis because Overton Park reminds them of the places they grew up running.

For locals, the event is like a homecoming, says Barry Roberson of Breakaway Running, who has helped to organize the event for years. And while the race has remained consistent, the park has changed. "I remember running when you didn't

even know where you were putting your foot down," he says. Regular trail maintenance, and the Conservancy's removal of invasive privet shrubs, has made the course easier to prepare. So has the availability of modern methods of course-marking. Don remembers riding through the forest in the middle of the night, throwing out flour to mark the route. By the time he returned in the morning, "the flour was gone and there were a bunch of fat squirrels laughing from a tree."

At the race's peak, participation was capped at 500 runners because the trails were so narrow. In those days, the Memphis racing calendar was much more sparse; today, more than 90 official events a year mean that the Classic no longer maxes out the trails. But for the runners who have been coming for four decades, it remains a chance to run with old friends and welcome the next generation to a course that's part of Memphis history.

A Life-Saving Routine

Last December, John Gilmore spent nine hours on a surgical table after an aortic valve dissection almost claimed his life. When he woke up after surgery, his doctors told him that his habit of walking several miles multiple times each week had helped to save his life. So as soon as he was able to resume his morning walks, John and his wife were back in Overton Park to greet the sunrise.

John, an anthropology professor at the University of Memphis and the spiritual director of Open Heart Spiritual Center, views the park as an asset for the city. He brings friends visiting from other cities on his morning walks, and few of them have ever experienced anything like the Old Forest right in the middle of the urban core. "They don't have access to a place like this," he says. "Being this close to nature and running into so many interesting people is great."

A recent anthropology lecture on place and space brought Overton Park to mind for John. "The concept was that place is a physical location, but space is what happens when people gather." He remembers bringing his granddaughter for her first visit to the playground when she was three years old. Her eyes widened and she exclaimed, "Look at all the babies!" For John, seeing kids meeting on the playground, watching golfers on the links, and attending concerts at Levitt Shell all add up to a space that Memphians can be proud of.



John Gilmore

Racing to the Beat

When Tomy’Ra Lowe’s son was born in 2009 with a severe congenital heart defect, her family began running a gauntlet of major surgeries, extended hospital stays, and fear for his future. Even after he was able to return home, she couldn’t shake the feeling that she wanted to help other families who were experiencing the same challenges her family had.

Last year, Tomy’Ra started the Warrior Hearts Foundation to provide encouragement and assistance to children with congenital heart defects and their families. And for the foundation’s first major fundraising event, she chose to host the Warrior Hearts Race to the Beat 5K at Overton Park.



Tomy’Ra’s son Carmus Batemon Jr., the inspiration for the foundation, leads off the race.

The event, which was staged in September at Rainbow Lake Pavilion, featured a DJ, giveaways, prizes, and a table where participants could write encouraging words to patients and families. Tomy’Ra worked with the Conservancy’s Visitor Services Coordinator, Fields Falcone, to choose a course for the race that wound through the Old Forest. “Our guests were so happy with the shaded route,” Tomy’Ra says. “It was so peaceful and enjoyable, and such a great fit for our event.”

That afternoon in the park provided funds that will allow the foundation to purchase gifts of teddy bears and blankets for children, help with meals, and assist with room and board for families traveling from out of town to visit a child in the hospital. The Warrior Hearts Foundation is one of many nonprofits that bring supporters to the park to gather and make a difference in the community. “It was a great experience,” Tomy’Ra says. “We’ll definitely be back next year!”

tina’s message

When I heard how John Gilmore (featured on page 2 of this newsletter) distinguished between a physical place and a space where people gather, I recognized, again, what makes Overton Park special. The authentic sense of community that you feel when you spend time in this park is nurtured by several things.

First, there are the “place” parts of the equation. The park is free and open to everyone, every day. It’s conveniently located in the heart of Memphis and accessible by multiple modes of transportation. It’s large enough to accommodate those who are gathering to celebrate and those who are hoping for quiet contemplation, and yet it’s small enough that you never feel isolated. It is clean and safe and beautiful.

Then we come to the “space” parts of the equation--what happens when people gather. Regular daily visitors go from being strangers to friends. Children find safe spaces to play and meet new friends, where they develop a sense of belonging as they are surrounded by a welcoming community. The feelings of isolation and otherness in a world increasingly divided start to soften and give way to an emerging sense of togetherness. Out of that, we become rooted and invested in a space that starts to serve as something deeper--a symbol of our values as a community.

It’s not merely happenstance that Overton Park serves as this community gathering spot. It takes work--advocacy, volunteer labor, and money. Each of us must contribute to its ongoing maintenance, giving what we can, from volunteering to help maintain the formal gardens and trails, to making a monthly donation, to sharing your stories with us on social media. Without your unique and authentic contribution, this would simply be like any other place.

You can make a monthly donation via our newly relaunched website: www.overtonpark.org.

Tina Sullivan

Melanie White on the magic of Overton Park

For Overton Park Conservancy board member Melanie White, the park has been a place to become part of a family.

After moving to Memphis from San Francisco in 1985, Melanie sought to reclaim all the time she'd spent commuting. She settled in Central Gardens and joined a running group that began at the Midtown Huey's and traveled through Overton Park. It was the beginning of more than 30 years of friendships made on the park trails.

"Over the years, I have made my best friends in the park, mostly spontaneously through running. It has been a huge part of my life," she says. For years she and several friends had a tradition of bringing their families and walking a loop together on Thanksgiving morning. She's discussed quantum mechanics on runs with a Rhodes math professor, debated politics with fellow runners, and donated a stroller to a St. Jude family who visited the park to remind them of life on their farm back home.

Of her interaction with the family, whose three children were all sharing a single small stroller, she says, "That could only have happened at the park. I am sure I would never have stopped them on the sidewalk. But something about this place makes people say hello and check on each other."

Melanie's commitment to the park extends beyond her daily runs. As vice president of the volunteer organization Park Friends for more than 20 years, she was involved with countless activities to protect and beautify the park. She helped to take care of trails, plant trees, pick up trash, and lead hikes. Park Friends created the first Old Forest Trail Map and installed the trail markers along the loop. Park Friends also became involved in the Overton Park Junior Open Golf Tournament, providing towels for the participants and recruiting sponsors and volunteers.

Melanie stepped down as vice president in 2010, and in 2012 she joined the board of the newly formed Overton Park Conservancy. "I'm lucky to be on the board, because I get to hear so many positive comments. The park is safe, clean, friendly, and *free*."



Melanie (third from left) with fellow DAR volunteers Marjorie Green, Anne Holzemer, and Liz Evans in the formal gardens.

"It's not free to maintain," she adds. "We have to raise money to keep it in good condition." She cites an increase in visitors as a positive outcome of creating the Conservancy. "Especially on weekends, the park is such a microcosm of Memphis. It proves to you that all people can get along."

In the long term, Melanie hopes to see the Conservancy become financially stable enough to support educational programming. She loves

watching families, especially those with no background in nature, connect with the wildlife of the park. "I love it when I run and I see a copperhead, and I can tell people that this is a beautiful creature and not something we should be afraid of."

In addition to her board service, Melanie volunteers regularly with the River City Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution to do landscape work in the formal gardens. She loves that the group has taken ownership of the space and hopes other park users feel that same level of investment. The park belongs to the people of Memphis, she points out. "They're not park visitors, they're park owners."

Melanie hopes park lovers will financially support this "unique and wonderful place where you can make friends, find peace, give back, take your children and grandchildren, and experience so much history. And in the mornings, it's almost like a chapel the way the light comes through the trees. It's just a magical space."



Right, with Corinna Campos at the Memorial Day Run.

Volunteers improve the park experience

So far this year, more than 350 volunteers have contributed 1,600 hours of effort to keep Overton Park operating at a high level. Among the groups who worked in the park are:

- **Bioventus**, whose volunteers repaired bridges on the limestone trail
- **Christian Brothers University**, which sent a team to remove mulch from around East Parkway Pavilion and replace it with easier-to-maintain gravel surfacing
- **Comcast**, which brought its annual Comcast Cares Day back to Spread Mulch Love at Rainbow Lake Playground
- **Medtronic**, whose volunteers repaired and painted picnic tables on the Greensward for the sixth year in a row
- **Memphis Dream Center**, whose students made short work of a giant pile of mulch at Overton Bark
- **Park Friends** and the **Rhodes College** cross-country team, who worked on refreshing the surface of the limestone trail
- **TruGreen**, whose team improved drainage in the small-dogs side of Overton Bark

We'd like to thank our friends at **Memphis City Beautiful** for helping to organize several volunteer events, including the annual MLK and 9/11 Days of Service, and for lending us the use of their tools.

Meet Our Volunteer Ranger

This summer, Jessica Smith began working with the Conservancy as a volunteer park ranger. She provides weekend support to customers renting park facilities, interacts with vendors, and serves as a park ambassador.



A junior taking online courses in tourism and recreation management at Arizona State University, Jess splits her time between school, work at Starbucks, and weekends in the park. Seeking to work outdoors and interact with the public, she reached out to the Conservancy earlier this year and offered to help supplement our staff on weekends.

As she has gotten familiar with working in the park, Jess says that her favorite activity has been programming. On good-weather weekends, she brings out games like giant Jenga and cornhole and invites park visitors to enjoy them. She also created a game that quizzes visitors on park facts. "Everyone comes to the park because it feels good to be here," she says. "It's a wholesome, refreshing, back-to-basics feeling."

After graduation, Jess plans to pursue work that will keep her outside for a good portion of the day. For now, you'll find her in the park on weekends, chatting with rental customers or walking the trails.



CBU students replaced mulch with easier-to-maintain gravel at East Parkway Pavilion; TruGreen volunteers made drainage improvements at Overton Bark.

Research: pawpaws, cardinals dominate the woods

In our spring issue, we shared that Eric Bridges is conducting research on the trees of the Old Forest, while Fields Falcone studies urban birds in Overton Park and other local forests. As they begin analyzing their data, we're learning more about which species are having the most success in the park.

Eric's study is a reproduction of a 1987 forest assessment by Dr. James Guldin that examined how the trees and shrubs of the forest relate to each other. This summer, Eric was assisted by fellows from Rhodes College and Christian Brothers University in recreating the 68 plots that Guldin used in his inventory.

With a sonic rangefinder donated by Park Friends, the team used sound to determine whether they were within the 52-foot radius of each plot's center. From multiple points within the plot, they would then record the tree and shrub species they saw.

Over a long, hot summer of counting, the team uncovered 59 species of trees and shrubs. "I think of myself as fairly environmentally conscious, and I was still surprised by how many species we found," says Rhodes fellow Allie Swanson. "Other forests I've visited don't have as much diversity as we have here."

Based on the number of trees within each plot, **we estimate that the Old Forest contains around 626,000 individual trees.** Of these, about 30% are over five feet tall and considered to be established; the rest are saplings which may or may not reach maturity.

Just like in Dr. Guldin's report, the most abundant species is the relatively small pawpaw tree, with its large, sweet fruit. But beyond the pawpaw, things have changed over the last 30 years. The second-most-abundant species in 2019 is the cherry laurel, a shrub used in residential gardens that was not present at all in Dr. Guldin's study. Several native species present in



1987, like black oak, no longer occur in the forest, while other non-natives like mimosa and paper mulberry have become established.

The next information Eric hopes to tease out of the data is whether there are more or fewer young native trees growing in to fill gaps left by older trees as they die off. He hopes to see some improvement in native regeneration since 1987, but the presence of several large gaps in the canopy suggests that something is still getting in the way of native trees reaching maturity. Those gaps will be the subject of further research beginning this winter.

Fields's key question is how birds are using the Old Forest (which is isolated in the urban core) compared to places like the Lucius Burch State Natural Area and T.O. Fuller State Park (which are more connected to other habitats). Halfway through her three-year data collection period, she has a few early observations--including that the Old Forest is great place to observe Northern cardinals, with more than three times the number of individuals observed in Overton Park than in T.O. Fuller State Park.

During her breeding season (summer) counts, Fields was not surprised to see that Overton Park had a lower number of both species and individuals than in the more connected parks. The broader amount of habitat available in those parks attracts species like the hooded warbler that may stop by the Old Forest for a snack during migration, but can't find the resources to set up nests for breeding over a full season.

However, the opposite was true during Fields's first winter count: Overton Park had both the highest number of species and individual birds. It's too soon to draw any firm conclusions, but if there's such a thing as a winter hotspot, Overton Park may just be one!



Six questions for our new deputy executive director

Overton Park Conservancy has welcomed Kaci Murley to the team as our Deputy Executive Director. In her new role, Kaci is responsible for fundraising, board development, and donor stewardship. We asked Kaci about working for the park--and about Memphis.

What was your path to the Conservancy?

KM: I found my way to the Conservancy after recently moving back to Memphis, my beloved hometown. For nearly a decade I lived in Knoxville and Nashville, working in various capacities related to higher education policy and advocacy for the state, but I always knew I wanted to be working in Memphis somewhere deeply connected to the city. The Conservancy is a perfect place for connecting community, advocacy, and policy--quite the dream.

What strengths do you bring to your role?

KM: A loud passion for Memphis, a community-centric understanding of coalition-building and policymaking processes, and an ability to work with diverse community groups with varying interests. I also love to tell a good story!

Where would you like to see the Conservancy in five years?

KM: I would love to see us executing a master plan.



Kaci and Coco at the Overton Bark grand re-opening

I'd also like to see the public become more aware of us as the nonprofit organization working hard to keep everyone's historic front lawn beautiful and accessible.

What do you think is the most important thing the Conservancy does?

KM: I think it's preserving the legacy of the space. I love learning the history of the park and the waves of challenge it's faced over the years. It's important to remember those things so

that we can continue creating a brighter future.

What other Memphis organizations do you love?

KM: I volunteer with the Memphis Child Advocacy Center, and I'm on the planning committee for this year's Works of Heart event. I mentor with tnAchieves, which is a partner organization to Tennessee Promise. I also am a big fan of Christian Brothers University, my alma mater.

What do you like to do when you're not working?

KM: I like to travel, and I enjoy reading historical fiction. Recently I've fallen in love with exploring the trails in the Old Forest with my husky, Coco. In the evenings or weekends I'm likely hanging out on a patio at Ecco on Overton Park or the Slider Inn with friends, old and new.

staff & board

Staff

Tina Sullivan

Executive Director

Eric Bridges

Director of Operations & Capital Improvements

Fields Falcone

Visitor Services Coordinator

Melissa McMasters

Director of Communications

Kaci Murley

Deputy Executive Director

Andrew Weda

Operations Manager

Jessica Smith

Volunteer Ranger

Voting Board Members

Dr. Ronné Adkins

Julie Ashby

Ekundayo Bandele

Eric Barnes

Kerri Campbell

Melissa Duong Namba

David French, Chair

Lucia Gilliland

Bill Haltom

Dr. David Hill

Monica Jones

Gale Jones Carson

Kimmie McNeil Vaulx

Cardell Orrin

R. Blair Parker

Markova Reed Anderson

William R. Reed, Jr.

Vishant Shah

Lauren Taylor

Yancy Villa-Calvo

Melanie White

Mary Wilder

Juliet Wischmeyer

Ex Officio Members

Jim Dean

Laura Hine

Maria Muñoz-Blanco

Dr. Emily Neff

Natalie Wilson

Members Emeritus

George Cates

Gary Shorb



VERTON PARK CONSERVANCY

1914 Poplar Avenue, Suite 202
Memphis, TN 38104

901.214.5450

www.overtonpark.org

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

Please pass this newsletter on to a friend!

NONPROFIT ORG.
US POSTAGE PAID
MEMPHIS, TN
PERMIT NO. 777

Park projects moving forward

Park Accessibility

Poplar Avenue has a new sidewalk, and park visitors walking or taking a MATA bus to the park have a safe new way to enter. The sidewalk, which runs from Veterans Plaza Drive to Tucker Street, was funded by MATA and completed in September.

Overton Bark

Thanks to support from Hollywood Feed and the Tennessee Dog Park Dash, the all-dogs side of Overton Bark is a much less muddy place to bring pets. The \$50,000 project to install new underground drains, add trenches to encourage water flow, and add fresh mulch was completed in October.

Trail Improvements

With a grant from REI, we will continue working this fall to make improvements to the limestone trail. REI volunteers



We celebrated the grand re-opening of Overton Bark with a costume contest presented by Hollywood Feed; judges Marcus Johnson and Jai Johnson chose the Hot Dogs as the grand prize winner.

will assist with improving drainage, repairing bridges, and correcting the trail grades in certain locations.

Rainbow Lake Playground

We are working with A2H, Inc. to redesign three components of the playground: the Big Green Mound, the spiral slide area, and the large rope structure. The redesign will improve accessibility, reduce erosion, and fix some wear and tear issues. Fundraising will begin soon.

The Greensward

The first phase of construction on the Zoo's parking lots began this summer, with expansion of the Prentiss Place lot. On busy days, expect the closure of the lot to result in some overflow parking on the Greensward, which will end permanently once the final project is completed. Construction on the main Zoo lot is set for early 2020.