

Great Neck dumpsite transformed into a park

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by Christina Hernandez

May 28, 2009 -- Once a dumping ground for street sweeping debris, a 1-1/2- acre swath tucked amid homes in Great Neck Village has been re-imagined as a park -- one that's intended for quietude.

The Strathmore Eco-Park, with plants native to the region, has been designed to be environmentally friendly, and features a sustainable boardwalk and a trail named after a local boy. It opened this month. "I'm absolutely delighted we were able to recapture this dump and preserve it as a nice, quiet place for our residents," Great Neck Village Mayor Ralph J. Kreitzman said in an interview.

The village acquired the property off Pond View Road in the 1930s and used it, until about two decades ago, as a transfer station for wood, leaves and street sweepings before the material was sent away for disposal, the mayor said. Kreitzman, who was on the board of the Strathmore Civic Association from 1974 until about 1985, said just about every year local residents would ask the village to turn the eyesore into a park.

It is not uncommon for municipalities to turn one-time dumping grounds into parks after the land is cleaned, said Bill Fonda, a spokesman for the state Department of Environmental Conservation. But it took a boost from Nassau County and a dip into a village park fund to make the nautical-themed park a reality. The \$630,000 cost was paid for by a \$250,000 grant from the county's 2004 Environmental Bond Act and about \$380,000 from funds that had been contributed by developers and designated for use on parks. "No village taxpayer dollars were spent," Kreitzman said.

With the money in place, Bob Retnauer, principal landscape architect of the St. James-based Retnauer Design Associates, was awarded the contract and given the task of designing an "eco-park" on largely vacant land. In the name of environmental friendliness -- which Retnauer said is a growing trend in park design -- the land was minimally altered and only native plantings were added. Weeds have already overtaken some of the native species, giving the park a forestlike feel.

Two streams running through the park are central to its nautical theme, while also serving a practical purpose: Water in the park drains into them. "We did not introduce any man-made drainage structure," Retnauer said.

Keeping with the nautical design elements, grass was planted that's intended to grow to look like a wheat field and, in a few years, will undulate in the wind and appear wavelike, he said. The boardwalk running through the park was built with Cumaru, a Brazilian hardwood that can last about a half-century and is grown specifically for harvesting. "We're not actually tearing down four acres of rain forest to build a boardwalk," Retnauer said. While boardwalks typically are built with posts that go perhaps 20 feet into the ground, he said, the park's walkway was secured with helical piles, shaped like corkscrews and inserted only a few feet deep, creating less of a disturbance.

Even the boardwalk is nautically themed with scalloped, waving edges, Retnauer said. Land forms inside and around the boardwalk are mounded to simulate waves, he said. And from a bench on the boardwalk, residents can take in views of Udall's Mill Pond.

Along with grass and wildflowers, workers planted native trees, such as serviceberry and redbud, and local shrubs, including clethra and inkberry, Retnauer said. "They're drought tolerant, they're used to the growing conditions of the area, they're more disease and pest tolerant," he said.

The planting was done by hand and the entire boardwalk was cut and shaped manually, Retnauer said. "There were no giant bulldozers," he said.

With no equipment, other than a few benches, and no lighting, the park has a natural, passive feel, Kreitzman said. It is meant to be low maintenance.

"The whole concept of preserving open space is a testament to the wisdom of the residents of Nassau County," county Legis. Judi Bosworth (D-Great Neck) said in an interview.

The park holds increased significance for the Portnoy family, who live a few houses away from its entrance. A stone path that meanders through the land was named for 9-year-old Zachary Portnoy, who died in 2007. He had battled a brain tumor for five years. After surgery in 2001 left the boy in a wheelchair, Robin Portnoy would take her son, whose nickname was Zachy, and his three brothers to a playground adjacent to the then-under construction eco-park. "They're going to make a beautiful pathway here," Portnoy, 42, would tell Zachy, "and we're going to walk on it." Zachy didn't live to see the park completed. But a walkway named Zachy's Path honors his memory.

For Robin Portnoy and her family, the park is a place to connect with their loved one. "I just feel like he's there when I'm there," she said. "I just feel like he's there with us."