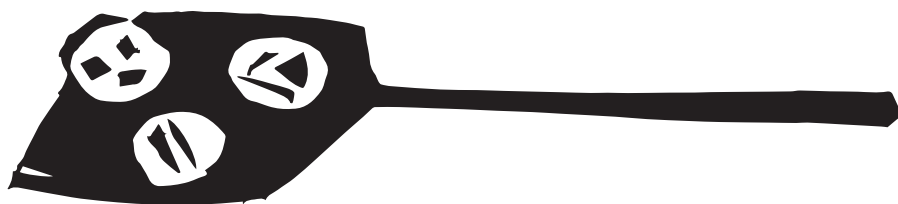


Dufferin Grove Park Newsletter

July 2024



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Dufferin Grove Park newsletter, July 2024



This newsletter is put out by CELOS, the Centre for Local Research into Public Space. Since 2000, when this little organization began at Dufferin Grove Park, we've been doing what we call "theoretical and practical research" into what makes public spaces – like parks – more hospitable and more lively. We've documented a lot of what we've seen and done, in this newsletter and on our four websites. The newsletter paused in February 2020 and resumes now.

Food: the cob kitchen: At the end of May, two friends of the park – recent Masters of Architecture grad, Elizabeth Antczac, and recent Master of Landscape Architecture grad, Izzy Mink – sent a detailed proposal for fixing the cob kitchen to Central Toronto Parks manager Peter White. The cob kitchen was built in 2005 with the work of many community members and the collaboration of City Parks plumbers and electricians. It became the summer playground café. The fact that the kitchen is built of sand, clay, straw and pebbles by community members -- including many children who are now young adults -- makes it a kind of miracle. But even miracles need maintenance, and that maintenance was already overdue when, sometime in April, thieves stripped all the copper out of the plumbing. So now the sinks don't work.

The cob restoration proposal would require a service contract of a different kind than the many RFPs and resulting contracts issued by Parks. In our letter of support for the proposal, we asked the manager "Can a partnership be created that would allow the cob kitchen to be useful to the park for another ten years?"

But Elizabeth and Izzy's proposal has had no response, not even an acknowledgment of receipt. And although recreation management promised in May to staff "the return of the traditional programming and animation in the park" including the "cob café and snack bar," there's no sign of movement in that direction. So perhaps it's time for this outdoor kitchen to be demolished.



In our May letter to the Parks manager, we wrote *“This rather humble “cob cafe” has provided many hundreds of hours of work and skills training to young people and also to people returning to employment. Would its destruction be an example of unbuilding a success?”*

But there was no answer to that either.

Staffing the Dufferin Grove food programs - Mary Sylwester’s story:

Mary started working at Dufferin Rink as a vegan cook in 2004. Someone had recommended her and said she was part of a federal employment program for people with a disability. In Mary’s case, she had a stroke in her twenties that left her with dysphasia (she can’t talk much) and weakness on her right side. The federal program paid part of her wages, and so Tino, the longtime rec supervisor at the time, was happy to give her a try. Then two things happened: 1. it turned out that Mary’s cooking was really delicious, and 2. the federal program was cancelled after Mary was here a month. So Tino put Mary on the regular payroll.

That was a lucky decision for the park. Mary’s cooking – vegan chili, curry soups, spicy salads, gnocchi with tomato-wine sauce, and banana muffins – became one of the all-ages draws for the social life of the park, at both the winter and summer snack counters.

But then in March 2020, most public spaces were shut down by Public Health. By the time things gradually reopened after two years, the indoor kitchen at the former Dufferin Grove clubhouse had been gutted for the construction project. Almost all the recreation staff were new. The bake ovens and the outdoor (cob) kitchen that could have resumed were a mystery to them, and most food programs were not restarted. Mary’s cooking shifts vanished without a trace. Instead, she was given one work shift a week *answering questions at the information table* at the farmers’ market. Not a good placement for a gifted cook with dysphasia.

The park building’s new industrial-style kitchen is now getting its first use – for giving various registered fee-based cooking classes. Mary was offered a cooking-teacher shift – but non-vegan, which she doesn’t want to do. She said no, so she’s assigned back to the farmers’ market information table, doing what management calls “customer service,” with a decrease in pay.



Mary says the kitchen should be a community club, not a restaurant or a school. And her current and former co-workers think that the talents of a gifted cook – whose disability workarounds are an inspiration – should not be wasted like this.

Friday Night Supper: Between 2004 and 2019, on summertime Fridays around the bake oven and wintertime Fridays inside the former rink clubhouse, there was a cheap family meal at the park, called Friday Night Supper. Recreation staff who liked cooking for crowds made the dinner. The kids could play in the park or the rink and the parents could catch up with friends and let the week’s work worries fade into the background. Even before alcohol became legal, some people brought their thermos of white or red “tea” and often shared.

Now that the building is done, is the family supper back?

The short answer is **no**. The recreation staff who knew how to make it work are mostly gone. The industrial-style kitchen in the renovated rink building has every kind of appliance including two giant dough mixers (but no staff know how to use them).

The bigger bake oven near the rink, where most of the food was cooked, needs to have its dome rebuilt (after 28 years of hundreds of uses every year from 1995 on). Cracks in the dome finally led to a roof fire last December, but so far the decision to rebuild the dome has not been made.

The long answer to the return of the Friday suppers is – **not sure**. It’s true that recreation management said in May that the suppers would come back. Of course, that can’t be done from an office via a keyboard. But one hopeful sign is that the Friday Night potluck, which was started over a year ago by park friends including former Dufferin Grove staff Heidrun Gabel-Koepff, is continuing. Heidrun suggested to management staff that it would be good to restart gradually, but not wait any longer. One or two cooks could cook a few basic dishes and the potluck would fill in the gaps.

It happens that there are two experienced rec staff cooks left. **Mary Sylwester** is one. The other is **Ginger Dean**, who worked with encampments during the worst of the lockdowns, but before that worked at all the different jobs that Dufferin Grove rec workers used to do, including both the suppers and the cob café. She said months ago that she was willing to come back,. But there was no



uptake. (There is often a delay of many months between when people apply to work at the City and when there's a response. By the time an application is considered, the applicants have often moved on.) But maybe in this case, management may make a move to take up Heidrun's suggestion. In the meantime, everyone is welcome at the potluck (after 6 pm near the building, inside if it rains). And if you want to encourage the new recreation manager to make a move, her name is Michelle Sirianni, michelle.sirianni@toronto.ca.

Henry Curtis helps out: A park friend brought in an old book about parks that gave us a boost, a best-seller in 1929, by a once-famous American playground crusader called **Henry Curtis**. Curtis wrote:

“Adults need recreation and exercise as well as children, and so far as possible the playground ought to be a community melting pot. During a large part of the year such a common meeting ground is almost the only possible condition of a real community life, and of wholesome relationships between parents and children and [within] the community....In many ways the German concert garden is the most delightful community playground in the world. There is excellent music, there is shade, and good refreshments are sold at reasonable rates. There is a delightful social atmosphere throughout it all, and at the edges are abundant playgrounds for the children...these new features might be furnished at a cheap rate....provided that it was done by the recreation department itself rather than through concessions.....”

A community letter from Peter Thillaye: *“One of the elements that made Dufferin Grove so useful and friendly was that there was always some member of staff or park friend that could advise, suggest or enable something that a family needed or was interested in. This meant that the rink clubhouse, the rinks, the market, the dog area, the playgrounds with its special feature of a sandpit where children were building, the wading pool, the washrooms, the soccer field, the basketball courts, were always in play, always humming. The skate rentals, the learn-to-play-shinny equipment, the bread ovens, the campfires, were all enabled and thrived.It is apparent to us in the west end that the City of Toronto is strongly intensifying housing density along the transit routes, and a much greater number of people – economically confined by rents, mortgages, steep food and transportation costs and low employment wages – will need green space but also things to do in those spaces.”*

The story of a knife: The **Clay and Paper Theatre company**, based at Dufferin Grove, has operated out of the 1913 park field house for 30 years. Before **David Anderson**, the director, moved his puppet-making tools there, in 1997, the building was an orphan, mostly used for small acts of vandalism by bored youth. That vandalism mostly fizzled out after David and, later, his co-director **Tamara Romanchuck**, brought in their theatre crews year after year and turned the little building into a hive of giant puppet-making activity.

But about fifteen years ago, an assembly of older men set up a kind of “bar culture” at two picnic tables right by the field house. Well before alcohol was legalized in parks, some of this group would start drinking beer and discussing the day’s issues in the morning. The group would grow in numbers as the day went on. The beer would flow and the discussions would often turn into animated bar-style arguments. These were mostly amicable. But sometimes, and more often lately, some of the arguments grew nasty, depending on who had joined in. It was hard for Clay and Paper to run their summer programs.

In the last few years, with some persuasion by Parks staff and by the bike police, the bar scene was moved over to the west of the centre path under the shade trees nearer to Dufferin Street. But this year, that area is being taken up by encampment tents, and the drinkers don’t want to be near them because, as two of them said, “we’re different, we have houses to live in.” Also, when Tamara and David asked the new Parks supervisor to have the bar-culture tables moved away from the field house, they were told it wasn’t practical.

So there’s been trouble. On June 21, David and Tamara each wrote a letter to Erella Gagnon’s [dufferingrovefriends@yahoo](mailto:dufferingrovefriends@yahoo.com) listserv, appealing for help from the community. From Tamara:

“This afternoon, on my own, I stopped by the DGP field house to pick up some supplies for a Clay and Paper Theatre performance tomorrow at the World Refugee Day concert. I had an upsetting experience with the drunken gang present there today that rattled me. It was a clear attempt to intimidate and frighten me.”

Tamara asked the eight men who were there to move the tables so she could open the field house door. They moved them right around the corner but were not pleased. Some of them *“proceeded to speak loudly about when is it an okay time to beat up a woman. This felt clearly for my benefit...I turned back to the door of the workshop when I noticed a knife on the floor just inside the threshold. I don’t know if it was already there when I opened the door or if it was placed*

there when I had my backed turned. Whichever the case my sense of danger increased, I kicked the knife further inside the workshop and I locked up and left, heading to the clubhouse to report the incident to the DGP Rec supervisor and assistant.

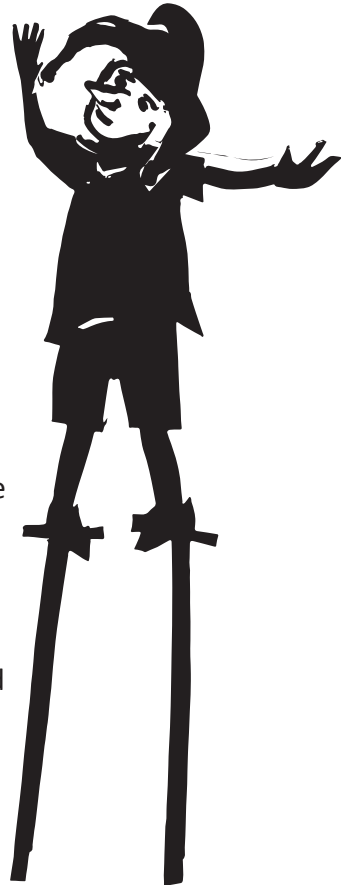
“I think the Park bears a responsibility here. We asked (over a month ago) for some simple preventative measures - moving the picnic tables - but the seriousness of the matter is not sinking in.

“With constant park and city staff changes we, as a professional theatre company, have had to continue to explain ourselves (& what we do & our credentials) over and over and over again these last four years.

“We have also been working in public space for over 30 years. We have supported and worked with many houseless and distressed folks, sharing our resources with them wherever we can - power to recharge phones, keeping knapsacks of toiletries to share with our houseless neighbours, sharing food and Gatorade to folk we see in distress. But this situation we are talking about now at the field house is NOT those situations.”

What happened next: Tamara and David’s letters to the listserv seem to have got people’s attention, both institutional and informal. **Formal: 1.** Parks staff moved the picnic tables away. **2.** The bike police started visiting. **Informal: 1.** The tables were moved near the table tennis area, but the players there asked them to move the tables further away, and not be noisy, and they did. **2.** One of the park neighbours phoned a previous encampment dweller, now housed, to tell him about the letters on the listserv. He came down to look. This man, who was a highly effective peacemaker at the park during the six months he lived here, says that threats and rudeness have no place in the park. He says he’ll keep visiting until he’s sure the message has been heard.

And Tamara and David have started work with this year’s summer students, so the friendly hubbub is back beside the field house.



Playground news:

1. the sandpit is so popular, especially with day camps visiting from all over the city, that it's often good to have a friendly, experienced staff person stationed there when it gets crowded. However, the summer staff this year are focused on the registered day camps whose base is in the renovated rink building. So we asked whether looking after the sandpit, because of its closeness to the wading pool, could become part of the job of the 3 wading pool guards. But their manager wrote no. *"Staff are required to be in the vicinity of the wading pool enclosure as part of Regulation 565."* Hmm. Since the wading pool is about ten feet from the sandpit (and it also has a water feature), this might be the year for the aquatics manager to make the job more interesting -- so that the WP staff don't have to doze in their camp chairs for so much of their shift.



2. The playground renovation: On June 22, two staff from Capital Projects held a pop-up information session about the upcoming construction of the playground. They emphasized that the project scope will not include building a nearby washroom, nor any repairs to the wading pool surface. It may include some new and trendy Berlin-style climbers, though. They said they'd tell more at later sessions.



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