

StarTribune



At Como Park, a hearth-warming

Article by: , Star Tribune

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Marie Michel loped up a gently rising path in St. Paul's Como Park on Thursday, the dense woods in these approximately 18 acres giving way to a small clearing where a massive stone fireplace rose into the air.

In her 85 years living in the area, she had never known about, much less seen, the park feature, long-shrouded by untamed vegetation and tarnished by graffiti and late-night partying.

"It's wonderful," Michel said as she crested the small hill. "It's like discovering a whole new park."

At the urging of the resident-run Como Woodland Advisory Committee, the city obtained \$250,000 in Legacy grant money to sandblast away years of graffiti and restore stones in the Joyce Kilmer Memorial Fireplace, built and named in honor of the New Jersey-born writer and poet -- best-known for the poem "Trees" -- who died in

World War I.

A rededication ceremony on Thursday afternoon revealed a much-improved fireplace, land prepped for native grasses and plans to turn the surrounding 17.75 acres into seven outdoor classrooms for schoolchildren.

"I'm stunned," said Deb Robinson, who spearheaded efforts to refurbish the fireplace.

Robinson used to live in the area and formerly led the committee that fought for preserving this pocket of woodland, given that so much of Como Park has been cleared for human use.

The fireplace was completed in 1936 and sits in the southwest corner of Como Park's 450 acres near the corner of Como Avenue and Beulah Lane across from McMurray Fields. It had fallen into disrepair over the years, becoming a dumping ground for trash and the site of late-night drinking, partying and fires that reportedly spewed out the fireplace chimney.

"It wasn't known as a safe place," said Nancy Phelps, who grew up and lives in the area.

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She turned out to see her 11-year-old son, Anthony, read a poem he wrote after his class visited the park last fall. Restoration on the fireplace began then and is ongoing.

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"I like having an outdoor classroom because you're more connected to the outside," said Anthony Phelps, a fifth-grader at Chelsea Heights Elementary School.

The city also obtained \$219,000 in Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources (LCCMR) funding to remove invasive plants, build trails and install educational posts in the classrooms.

Bryan Murphy, landscape architect for the St. Paul Parks and Recreation Department, the restoration project's manager, said funds were also sought from the city's capital improvement budget to improve parking and roadways near the fireplace. That funding has not yet been approved.

"We're proud to have this," Murphy said of the fireplace, which he views as a "front door" to the area.

The restoration, native plantings and other work may be done by fall, Murphy said.

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