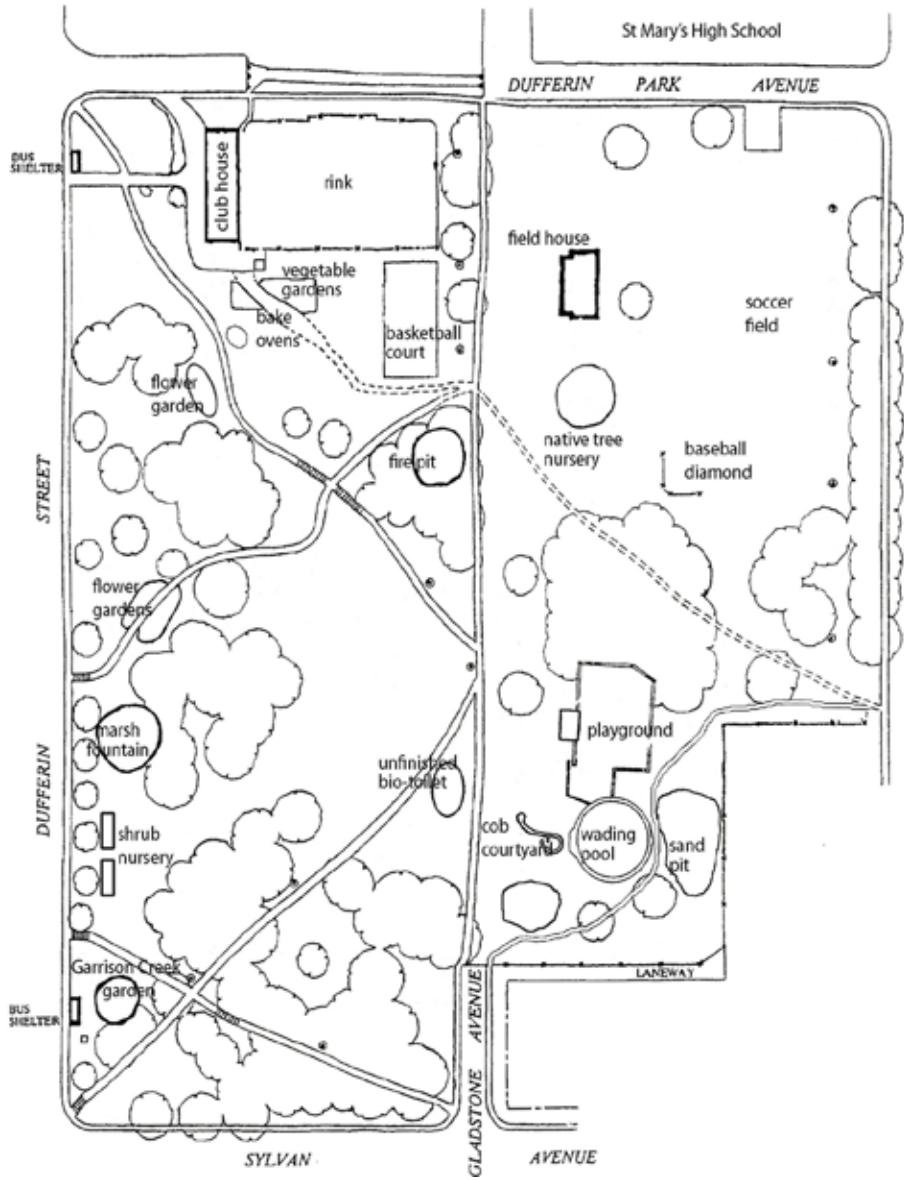


# Dufferin Grove Park

as a neighbourhood commons  
- stories from 1993 to 2015 -



# Dufferin Grove Park Map



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- stories from 1993 to 2015 -

Jutta Mason

*Photo: Laura Bernan*



Centre for Local Research into Public Space (CELOS)  
[celos.ca](http://celos.ca)

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# Dufferin Grove Park

## as a neighbourhood commons

### Stories from 1993 to 2015

The parks, streets, community centres and other public places in Toronto are owned by the Corporation of the City of Toronto. That organization behaves quite a bit like any other corporation, with managers staking out their turf and workers defending their workplace. The people who drive on the roads or sit on the park benches or skate at the public rinks are often referred to as “customers,” “clients,” or “patrons.”

There's another way to understand a city's public spaces: as a commons. There are various definitions of that word, for instance this one: *The commons are the things that we inherit and create jointly, and that will (hopefully) last for generations to come. The commons consists of gifts of nature such as air, oceans and wildlife as well as shared social creations such as libraries, public spaces, scientific research and creative works.* ([www.onthecommons.org/about-commons](http://www.onthecommons.org/about-commons)).

In 1993, Dufferin Grove Park took a turn in that direction. Here is a little collection of stories spanning the seventeen or so years when this commons was able to grow and put out its blooms. Many of the stories are told by or about the people involved. This is not a list, nor a ranking in order of importance, of the effort or ingenuity of the people who helped. When we first got started, we put names up on a frieze along the rink clubhouse walls, adding names as more and more people contributed their work or their ideas. After a few years we ran out of room. We could have started a second row, and even a third one, but it began to seem like boasting, both for the people whose names were on the frieze and for the park: “see how popular we are!” So we stopped. That means that many participants are not named here, including some without whom this commons would have faltered much sooner. Their faces may show up in the photos, though.

As more people joined in, I started a monthly newsletter, so that the stories would be passed along beyond word of mouth. At various points it seemed like the Corporation was starting to stir against this commons. One of those times prompted park friends

to set up a neighbourhood listserv, then a park website. The early attempts to reign in the commons didn't work out, but then there was the opposite problem: as the park's experiments became well-known, Dufferin Grove Park began at times to feel like a brand. That's when a few of us formed a new group, CELOS, the Centre for Local Research into Public Space. We wanted to document the adventures that were multiplying in this commons, but without drifting into the region of fairy tales. And we wanted to document the problems we saw at other Toronto parks. That made us quite unpopular at city hall, and by 2010 the need to tame this commons became urgent for the managers.

The corporation has reasserted its control now, and the commons has steadily been fading. Some of the elements that grew at Dufferin Grove have morphed into *services*, popular with the next wave of *consumers*, but increasingly inefficient and expensive to maintain – and inequitable compared to the services delivered to other neighbourhood parks.

So this particular expression of the commons has had its moment. What remains is to tell some stories that might be useful for the next occasion when a park commons will be “jointly created,” as the definition says. A caution: a commons is much more like a garden (can be quite unruly, with lots of interesting weeds) than like an alternative management agency employing credentialed advocates or certified planners. It does however need to find a way to pay people for the routine work of upkeep: picking litter, fixing benches, building washrooms, serving food, keeping things in good order. The taxes we already pay are a good solution, if we can jointly find a way to use them for our commons.

I see this booklet as a kind of *samizdat*, an unofficial document unsanctioned by the corporation. Although we don't make copies using carbon paper as dissidents in the Communist bloc once did, we print the booklet as needed on our little colour printer and manually cut the paper with a donated guillotine paper cutter. Then we bind it with a hand-operated spiral binding machine that CELOS bought in 2001 with some Jane Jacobs Prize money we got in recognition of our work. Doing it this way feels nice. The text was set by Nayssam Shujauddin (see her story

on page 64), wearing one of her many hats, in this case, making an illustrated book. The photos are credited individually except when one of our group took them. The drawings were done by Jane LowBeer, artist and CELOS board member, and have been used hundreds of times in the park newsletters over the years – so much better than if there were only words.

A special thanks to Sandy Houston of the Metcalf Foundation, who gave CELOS \$22,000 to do a booklet about the park, way back in 2003. What I came up with at that time turned out not to be what they were looking for. But their grant funded many of the previous online and handbook versions of this story – it let us practice. Then, when John Broley of the GH Wood Foundation called, out of the blue, in 2014 and said his board was concerned about preserving the Dufferin Grove park legacy – and could we use a little money to do that? – the time was right.





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## The Dufferin Mall donation

In late 1992, the Dufferin Mall, across the street from Dufferin Grove Park, got in trouble with the neighbourhood for its plan (never realized) to add some condo towers. Early the next year, the mall manager offered to donate \$25,000 to the park playground as a good-will



donation. A public meeting to discuss the donation was not well publicized, and nobody came. The city's Recreation director, Mario Zanetti, encouraged me to ask around in the neighbourhood.

## The two-day neighbourhood phone survey



I thought about an angry public meeting I had gone to a year before. The main idea for improving the park at that meeting seemed to be to send people to jail for

drinking and bad language. Would there be more fruitful ideas if park users had to think about how \$25,000 could be spent to make things better? I was curious. For two days, I called everyone I knew who used the park – although I didn't know a lot of people, at that time. At the end of each conversation, I asked the person to give me the phone numbers of one or two other neighbours who might be interested.

My question was: “what would you like to see in Dufferin Grove Park?”

At the end of the two days, and with a sore ear from holding that big 1992 telephone earpiece, I collated all the answers. The wish list was remarkably simple. People said they wanted more things for older children to do, not only for the under-six kids who loved the playground. And they wanted a basketball court for the youth, instead of the weedy old bocci court that no one used. They wanted more plantings, including native-species planting beds, to add interest to walks in the park. They wanted

more benches and picnic tables for sitting down, particularly the seniors: “*we can’t just sit down on the grass, it’s too hard to get up again.*” They wanted outdoor arts performances, like Toronto parks used to have. And they wanted some food in the park. This last answer came particularly from immigrants, who told me stories about the friendly socializing around food in the public spaces of their countries.

That wish list was the beginning, some simple ideas that seemed worth working for. Nobody had suggested more jail time for bad behavior in the park.

I sent the wish list off to the city staff. They sent flyers to every household and, in April, they held another public meeting. This time about forty people came, to consider the ideas on the list. The main concern was the suggestion of adding a basketball court: partly because it would result in paving over a green space, and partly because it could attract youth who would make trouble. But in the end, the people at the meeting approved the

basketball court too. Some neighbourhood youth had come along with their parents, clearly determined to make sure that this one item would not fall victim to adult squeamishness. They argued that youth needed something in the park that they could love, and they were quite sure that they would love a basketball court. So the grownups said... “*well, okay. If it doesn’t work out, it could always be removed.*”

## The adventure playground/sandpit

The city staff asked us – when park users say they want more things for older children to do, what kinds of additions do they



have in mind? We said – we've been told that a sandpit is really nice. A woman from the artist-run summer camp at Trinity-Bellwoods Park had described their sandpit to us. They put it in after they saw a sandpit at Spiral Garden, another artist-run camp, this one for disabled kids at the Hugh MacMillan kids' rehab centre. A sandpit is just a really big sand play area, this woman said, with some branches for building tipis, and some digging implements, and water nearby to keep the sand from drying out and getting dusty.

The advantage of making this the first to-do item on the wish list was that a sandpit was big, and cheap, and fast to install, and (we were told) very popular with kids up to their early teens. We would need a City backhoe driver to dig out a hollow, 20 feet wide, 40 feet long and 15 inches deep, and fill it with gravel for drainage, then four truckloads of sand piled overtop, then logs to surround it, and some branches and shovels for the kids to start working. There was ample space for this sand play area, right beside the wading pool.

Simple! But then the plan began to run into trouble. First, some of the neighbours whose houses backed on to the south-east part of the park were unhappy that there would be any



*The empty spot where the sandpit could go*

expansion of the playground, with more noise. After the Recreation director, Mario Zanetti, himself came to the park to ask them to give the sandpit a chance, the objectors withdrew, and it seemed that the project would

go ahead. But May came and went, and the weeks ticked by into June, and still no backhoe arrived to start making the sandpit. Summer was almost here and there were no gardens, either, and no music, and no food, no more benches, and no basketball court – and no plans for any. Phone calls were not returned. The four

of us who were following up on this learned something important. In a big city, the government might say *yes, yes, yes* to local ideas, but nothing might ever actually happen.

In the middle of June we realized we had to make a move to jump the gap between the park and the government. We had

an inspiration. We decided to write a letter to the Mayor, June Rowlands, inviting her and the Dufferin Mall manager, David Hall, to the official opening of the new sandpit play area, now christened “The Big Back Yard.” We hoped that the connection between the

Mall and the City would attract enough interest that somebody in the Mayor’s office would take notice of our request. The date we gave was July 5 – three weeks away.

It worked. The Mayor’s office said, yes, she would love to attend. She was fond of playgrounds, and also fond of corporate donations. We called the City Parks staff and told them that we hoped there would be something in place for the mayor to see when she came. All of a sudden, the sandpit project moved right up to the front of the line.

Three weeks later, the sandpit was ready. Two days before the Mayor was due to come, we opened the padlock of our new storage shed to find ten flats of bedding plants in the shed – a surprise gift from the Parks Horticulture crew. The City backhoe



operator, after he was done with the sandpit excavation, had already dug us a small children's garden (his idea), around the corner from the sandpit. So on July 5, the new play area was resplendent with its new shed, its



hilled-up sandpit surrounded by giant tree trunks. The children's garden was planted with flowers. Just before the mayor arrived, a remote TV vehicle came and screwed its antenna as high as the trees. The Guatemalan cook from the nearby indoor park, Isabel Perez, had made little tortillas with bean spread. The park kids, a pretty rough bunch normally, turned into the house-proud sandpit "staff," politely offering the tortilla snacks to the Mall staff and the City staff and the politicians and the cameramen. That was the formal beginning of the Dufferin Grove commons.



## Sand play in history

The first Metro Parks Commissioner, after World War Two, was Tommy Thompson, much beloved for his love of parks and his good sense. (He put up signs in the parks: "please walk on the grass".)



At the Toronto Archives there's a copy of a speech Thompson gave at a long-ago Parks Conference, in which he told his colleagues:

"I passed a playground the other day in which I saw a sandbox that I suspect was twelve feet square. To me, this is an insult to the sand area concept. The time has come when we've got to get bigger in our thinking and realize that, when a group of kids want to carry out something that stimulates their imagination - and this is one of the things we should be responsible for promoting - we should be putting in a sand area half as big as this auditorium. We should be putting in the kind of sand that kids can use to build, and we should not only keep it clean every day, but make sure that it's moist enough to do something with."



*Elyse Pomeranz*

Elyse Pomeranz, an artist living in the neighbourhood, had agreed to lead some art programs beside the sand pit. The mall manager said that \$5000 of their donation could be spent on honoraria for people to work with kids in the park. Elyse found four other artists to help, each one with a different skill. The Parks Department said they couldn't spare a storage shed for the art supplies, so the mall manager threw in another \$1100 and we got a carpenter to build a park-style storage shed. Elyse painted it orange with an African pattern, and the park staff got us a city padlock for it.





Elyse and her friends carried out wonderful activities with children those first two summers – weaving, sewing on a treadle sewing machine, making felt, building shelters, beading, making toys and instruments. Margie Rutledge, one of the four neighbours who launched the sandpit and our leader for program ideas, found a circus teacher and got him to make five sets of lightweight aluminum stilts. He tried to teach the park kids juggling and tightrope walking as well, but

they only wanted to walk on stilts, a skill they picked up almost instantly. Sometimes they walked over to the mall on the stilts, shaking people's hands from up high.

Elyse had asked the city to put up snow-fencing around the “Big Back Yard” area, to mark out the new place. She went to a second-hand clothing dealer and bought a few bags of substandard but colourful clothes by the pound. She and the kids ripped the clothes into hundreds of fabric strips, tied them



*tearing up fabric strips*



*building the door frame*

together, and wove them through the snow fence slats, to make the fence look nicer. Elyse wanted a real doorframe as an entryway. The kids insisted that they could build the frame and erect it themselves. While they

were sawing and hammering, a couple of the 12-year-olds got in an argument and went after each other with hammers. A few days later another argument ended with one of the younger boys pulling a switchblade. He chased his cousin out of the sandpit with this knife, and into the back lane, with three of us running behind, shouting at him to stop. No-one was hurt, but we were dumbfounded – who were these young children who had come to help build the playground but also carried knives?

## Fernando

An ice cream vendor started coming to Dufferin Grove Park just around that same time. His name was Fernando. He pushed a solid little stainless steel ice cream cart around the city. It had thick rubber tires and colourful ice cream and freezie posters, displayed in frames on the side of the cart. He said he was from Mexico, and had brought his cart with him when he moved his family to Toronto.

Fernando took his cart to various parks, but as the summer went on, he spent more and more time at Dufferin Grove. He helped the kids with their carpentry, and they helped him with the cart. If he had to go and pick up more supplies, he put one of the kids in charge of the cart, and the kid got ice cream in return for keeping an eye out. Fernando had no permit to sell in the park, and if police came into the park, the kids alerted Fernando in time for him to get the cart out onto the sidewalk, headed up the street.



*Fernando and the park kids*

Fernando told the kids he didn't want to see anybody fighting. Every day he gave them solemn talks about good behaviour, and they listened, sitting on a park bench around his ice cream cart. Gradually, as Elyse and her co-workers built up the arts

activities, more people started coming to the park. Fernando sold more ice cream and the regular “park kids” – which is what they called themselves – had to watch his cart more often. They took the task of helping him seriously. The knives disappeared.

## Isabel

Food-wise, for the park kids, dessert was taken care of by the ice cream. The problem remaining was lunch.



Lunch was tricky. The park kids often didn’t eat. We thought it would be good to sometimes have lunch at the park, for those kids who didn’t bring any money to buy food at the food court across the street. Also, the to-do list of “what would you like to see in Dufferin Grove Park?” had called for food in the park. But a public health inspector who came to the community meeting when the list was discussed had us worried that getting food into the park would be complicated.

Recreation director Mario Zanetti came to the rescue, unwittingly. He had once told us about his two principles of how to make change in a bureaucracy: *(1) start small and (2) use the rules against themselves*. We decided to try this.



*Isabel’s first park cooking fire*

A friend, Isabel Perez, grew up cooking over a fire in Guatemala, and she used to miss that kind of cooking, living in Toronto. She told us that when the first few people in her neighbourhood back home got gas stoves, most of their families refused to eat the food cooked on them, saying the gas made the food taste bad. Everyone wanted to keep on eating food cooked over fire. When we asked Isabel whether she would try cooking over a fire at the park, she said she’d love to.

We contacted the recreation manager in charge of Dufferin Grove, and asked if we could have a campfire. We wanted, we told him, to try doing one or two campfires for some show-and-tell heritage cooking with our Guatemalan street-food-seller friend, Isabel.

Heritage programs were important for newcomer kids, didn't he agree? Isabel would show them how tortillas were cooked over an open fire. The recreation manager said, there's got to be a bylaw against campfires in city parks. But he checked anyway – and to his surprise,

*Learning to make donuts*

the Fire Chief said: *draw us a map for where you want the fire, tell us how you plan to keep it safe and put it out, get permission from the parks staff, and then it's fine with us.* So we sent in the map and the description, and had the first campfire, and then the second, and when those worked out really well, we got permission for Isabel to do campfire cooking with kids twice a week. We bought potatoes and oil at the mall, and Isabel helped the kids make “demonstration” French fries.

Nobody seemed to mind if the kids ate them too. We bought spaghetti and tomato sauce and heated those up over the fire as a demonstration

lunch dish, which also



*Mayor Hall visits the campfire*

got eaten after the “lesson” was done. More and more kids came. The regular park kids got so good at helping the newer arrivals that we began to give them honoraria of \$5. The same ragtag kids came with us to help out at special events at other nearby parks, bringing along our stilts, and the campfire pots, art materials, and

a tipi with a felted cover. Mostly “our” kids coached other kids on stilts, or helped them roll out tortillas with Isabel.

Sometimes when Isabel was cooking at the fire in the summertime, the smoke would curl slowly upwards through the trees and people going by would just stop in their tracks and stare. Cooking over a fire is a time warp. The cook moves more slowly and the food smells different. The sight of such a thing was surprising and disorienting for people walking through the park, and after they had stopped to take a look, they often walked away shaking their heads and smiling.



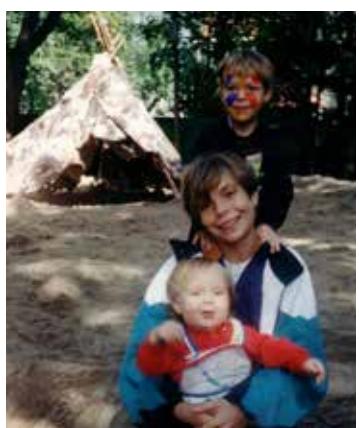
*Pat MacKay*

## **Pat**

In 1994 a city staff friend suggested that we apply for a “Safe City” award from the Toronto Community Foundation. To our astonishment, we got the award, and a little group of us went to Metro Hall to pick up a cheque for \$3000. But the biggest piece of luck that day was not the cheque. It was a little note that was passed along to me from further down the row as we were listening to the award ceremony speaker.

The note said “I like what you’re doing and I think I can help you.” It was signed “Pat MacKay.” I looked down the row and got a friendly smile and a nod from an older woman sitting at the other end. A moment later some of the park kids who had come to the ceremony with us got into a noisy argument as they were going up a down escalator nearby, and I had to run out. Afterwards there was only time to quickly shake hands with Pat and exchange phone numbers.

A few days later I called Pat and invited her to the park. We showed her all around and she



*Come and see our teepee!*

met the kids. We told her that we had ideas, but we couldn't keep searching for people who would do wonderful park projects mostly for free. It turned out that Pat had been on quite a few boards and foundations. She offered to become our mentor in fundraising. With guidance from her, we got a grant of \$10,000 from the Ontario Trillium Foundation, and that was the start of our grant-writing. Pat came through for us again, introducing us to the Maytree Foundation and the GH Wood Foundation. After a while we jokingly adopted a nickname for Pat MacKay: we called her our fairy godmother.

*From Pat:* “The year Dufferin Grove got the ‘Safe City’ award, I was on the board of the Toronto Community Foundation. The real truth is that we did not have much money to award and we wanted to get the most attention for the Foundation. I am convinced that all great cities are built on strong neighbourhoods, and that requires leadership and initiative and participation by the residents. I was influential in choosing the awards to recognize projects that were neighbourhood-builders. The board had heard about your process of starting in one corner of the park and offering inviting activities -- the cooking fire, the mini-circus with its tight-rope, places for elderly men to play cards, and expanding the play area to let kids build and invent and get muddy.

“You could have put up a neon sign that said ‘Welcome to the Park’ but it wasn’t needed!



*Lieutenant Governor Hilary Weston visits the park*

“A banner day for me came a few years later, when Lieutenant Governor Hilary Weston visited the park. Her limo was welcomed by puppet characters on stilts, along with a concertina band with their top hats, leading the proces-

sion to the stage where the kids' steel band played the vice-regal salute. Unique! I recall the humour of Her Honour telling the school classes there that her family, which owned Weston's Bread and Loblaws, had 'something to do with bread.' Then when I left the park that day, there was the class of little kids waving to me, calling "good-bye Fairy Godmother," – I guess someone had told them that's who I was.

"That day was a never-to-be-forgotten experience!"



*The Queen Victoria School Grade 6 Steel Band*

## Margie

Margie Rutledge had an idea of doing a herb garden near the new vegetable patch, in an old-fashioned formal design, because we had extra bricks. She hired two El Salvadorian youths from the "L.A." (Latinos Americanos) gang with our "breaking the Cycle of Violence" grant,



*Margie's herb garden*

to help. The day before they started, my son Luke and I had gone to the construction dump at Leslie Street Spit and gathered as many wet (it was raining) grimy bricks as we could

load into my car. The car was scheduled for the wrecker the next day and damage to the springs, or dirt on the upholstery, didn't matter. We found a whole pile of old cobblestones there too, and we went back four times, getting these free treasures for the park.



So Margie and her little son Vincent, and Mario and Wilson from the L.A. gang agreed on the design of the circle-and-cross herb garden, outlined by the free bricks. They filled the various sections with eight different herbs, and Margie planted a white rose in the centre, ringed by some small flowers the Parks staff gave us. There was a heat wave at the time, and we have a photo of four-year-old Vincent in the garden, looking with admiration at Mario – standing there in the heat with his shirt off, flexing his truly splendid muscles.

*Mario and Vincent*

### Lily

In December 1994, city part-time staff Lily Weston's work hours were increased to five days a week, to look after the rink clubhouse. We had dug up a rosemary plant from the herb garden and put it in a ceramic pot on the windowsill inside the rink, along with a few impatiens that were still blooming when the frost came. When Lily watered the plants, the kids would lean on the counter and watch her. Lily was like a part-time mother at the rink house – the “mother” of the kids and of the plants, as well as of the building and the rink. Everything worked better with her there. Outside,



*Lily Weston*



the snow blew around and the skaters shot pucks on the hockey rink or twirled around on the pleasure-skating side. Inside, it was warm and clean and the kids argued or played chess or sneaked cigarettes in the washroom, or just sat there looking comfortable and kind of sleepy. The old



*skaters on the rink*

men played cards at their tables in the change room, and told jokes to make Lily laugh. During that winter we sometimes wondered what our focus was – what was the point of the things we had started

at the park? But most of the time it was enough to see those kids and old men in the rink house, and to admire the rosemary plant putting out its new leaves on the window sill.

## David

In another part of the park, near the unused field house, Dufferin Grove had a little problem. The south side of the building, out of the sight lines of St.Mary's High School, had become an unofficial "marijuana club." And those fellows who gathered there daily were not the dreamy kind of weed smokers. When they got high, they got energetic. The park's main drinking fountain, used by teams who were playing field sports, was located where the "club" met. The fountain was vandalized and pushed over so many times that finally the Parks maintenance staff just put a danger fence around it and left it lying on the ground.

That year, David Anderson of *Clay and Paper Theatre* was looking for a garage where he could store some of the theatre's papier-mache puppets.



*David Anderson*

Some park friends asked him if he might be interested in moving the puppets, and his puppet-making materials, into the unused park field house instead. The idea was that if *Clay and Paper* used the field house not only for storage but also as a workshop, there would be, as Jane Jacobs says, “eyes on the park” – and on the marijuana club. I proposed the idea to the Parks and Recreation director. He thought it was worth trying. David moved his puppets in, and he started building new puppets with his group. The field house soon became a draw for people to drop by and watch what the theatre people were making.



That wholesome scene seemed to make the marijuana club guys feel they had drifted into the wrong movie. They soon stopped coming there. The drinking fountain was relocated and repaired, so the players on the sports field could once again quench their thirst.

Clay and Paper began to add spectacle to the park, bringing much more in return for their puppet-making space than had been asked. Over the last twenty-two years they've presented plays, a new one almost every year.

There was a year when fire (as in bake-ovens) was the theme, another year it was finance (and Walmart), another year it was the Portuguese hero and poet



Camões. Up to now there have been more than 19 original plays, always involving actors and musicians and visual artists. The troupe is mostly student artists, many of them hired through the Canada Summer Jobs program.

(The program relies on the federal MP's support and is often announced at the last possible moment – a cliffhanger for Clay and Paper's rehearsal schedule.)

David says there have been unexpected adventures over the past 20 years. One year there happened to be political demonstrations downtown in front of the U.S. Consulate around the time when the summer play opened in the park. When the giant puppets came out at the park's annual Clay and Paper production, the police showed up – on horseback and with backups. It took a little while for the actors to convince them that this was a play, not an outlier anarchist demonstration bound for the consulate. And there was another year when a robbery scene in Clay and Paper's play about finance (called "Gold") seemed so real to a passerby in the park that he called 911. The Fourteen Division gang squad came out very fast (and sized up the situation and left).

Clay and Paper hasn't only been doing performances. They also put on the yearly "Night of Dread" community parade, always on the Saturday before Hallowe'en. Some years there have been a thousand people taking part. David Ander-



*giant puppets at the Night of Dread parade*



son recalls that one year, when he set off with the band and the police escort, and the parade started to leave the park, a stranger marched up to the other end of the crowd, held up a banner, and summoned people to follow him. So the parade started off in two opposite directions.



*The rink house becomes a costume room*

David had to stop the parade, remove the “parade thief,” and get the parade going back the right way.

There have been many other live performances, by many other artists – theatre, music, dance, storytelling – at Dufferin Grove Park over the years, too many to list. But Clay and Paper Theatre has been the steady presence. Once they got started in 1994, they never stopped.

## Fabio

During the summer of 1995, we built a bake oven in the park. When it was finished, it seemed like we ought to have some kind of ceremony to “open” it, so in October we put up posters on the lamp-posts and invited the mayor and got a wine license. The wine meant that a temporary fence had to be put up to enclose the gardens and the oven. When the Parks staff came to pound in the stakes for the snow fencing, the basketball players watched them from the court without saying anything.

The morning before the ceremony Fabio Tavares, the eleven-year-old who always knew everything first, came to my



*Fabio Tavares*

*Photo: Vince Pieropando*

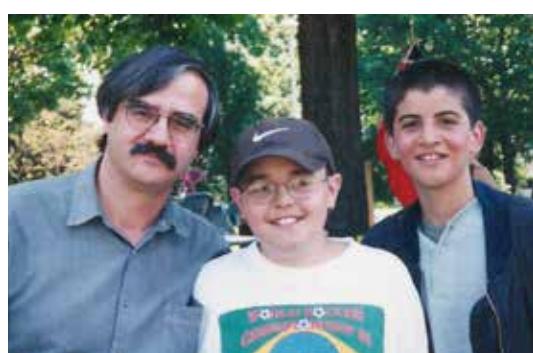
house, saying the oven had been damaged and the whole area was a mess. I went down to the park with him right away. The picnic tables were upside down, the benches had been pushed over, the oven roof had a lot of shingles torn off, and those shingle pieces were spread out all over the ground. The gardens were alright, though.

Fabio and I cleaned up and patched the roof with clear plastic. I asked around, and eventually I heard that some of the basketball players had decided we must be putting a permanent fence around that whole area, and they had got mad. No fences! No words either, just action.

So we had the opening ceremonies with a ragged roof. We put a big fire in the oven anyway. Sixty loaves of bread, and soup, and apple fritters, were all consumed within a few hours, served up for everyone by Fabio and some of his friends. The mayor came and the kids got their picture taken with her. Vince Pietropaulo, a photographer who had been taking pictures as the oven was being built, took the pictures of the bread being baked. Then he wrote an article about the park for a magazine that was put into the magazine slot in all Air Canada planes. Passengers on their



*Photo op with Mayor Hall*



*Vince Pietropaulo with park kids*

way to Paris or London, Lagos or Tokyo, leafed through Vince's photos of the kids walking on stilts, or sewing a tipi cover on the treadle sewing machine. High up in the air, travellers could

ponder a picture of fire and bread in a wood-fired bake oven in a Toronto park – an oven not unlike those that were used to bake bread a thousand years before the age of air travel.

## Bake Ovens

When we built our first bake oven, we found that an oven is a story magnet. People rarely passed by the park oven when something was baking without stopping to talk. Ovens like ours were used in Portugal, Italy, Poland, Trinidad, Germany, Greece, Spain, Guyana, and rural Canada. Because ovens were so common and so much a centre of communal activity, many people have been told family stories about what was cooked in them, and they recognize the oven as something familiar.



At the same time, because communal ovens later became scarce, almost lost, seeing such an oven is always a shock for people.

This means that the natural inhibitions of strangers about speaking to one another are overcome by the natural desire to tell what one knows about this surprising object. Such stories have to do with recollections of smell and taste and effort, and tend to be accompanied by large, lively gestures.

This attracts other people walking by. There is a lot of enthusiastic interruption, as people pile on layer after layer of description:

“This is how my grandmother tested for temperature...”



*Baking in the winter*



*Pizza Day at the oven*

“This is how my mother marked her loaves so she could tell them apart from her neighbours’ loaves after they were finished baking....”

“This is how our plum cakes smelled when they were carried home through the streets of my neighbourhood after baking in the baker’s big oven....”

“This is how we opened the oven to get out the stew at the end of the Sabbath....”

“When we were children we had to gather kindling from this certain wood.....”

A public oven that gives a strong push for strangers to share overlapping stories is a very good thing, in a city where so many people know so little about one another’s stories, past or present.

## Yo

For three years, while studying at York University, Yo Utano was one of the park cooks and bakers. Then she returned to Japan. From one of Yo’s school essays of that time:

“Food pleases us, torments us, and keeps us together. In this multi-dimensionality, I see many problems and solutions, pains and hopes, all at the same time. Coming from the countryside in Japan to Toronto (which I once found a very depressing place), I found a hope through my encounter with a park and the community surrounds it.

“In this park, breads are baked in the park’s communal ovens. This wood oven is what first caught my eyes. I love both



*Photo: Wallace Seto*

process and product of baking, especially the bread with natural yeasts. It is such a nicely slow process, which firstly allows me to acquire the attachment to the food I make, secondly makes me appreciate how well the natural world of fungus works, and thirdly makes me realize how beautiful the slowness is. The ovens at the park bake bread simply with the heat from burning wood. They not only bake great breads, but also look as though they were symbols of lost simplicity by being disconnected from modern technology.

“....Breads are baked from early in the morning for the market that starts at three o'clock in the afternoon. What is fantastic is that the process is done in the open air—the ovens are built in between gardens, the workplace is also where people going by can see the staff working with dough, and the products are sold in the baskets outdoors. The baskets full of breads under the blue sky made me, and probably many other people, unconditionally happy.”



*Bread baked in the park oven*

## The rink house renovations

When I tell people the story of a small group of park friends taking down the centre wall in the rink change room ourselves, instead of raising \$16,000 for city contractors to do it, each time there is a gasp. The story shocks people. Some listeners think it represents a David-and-Goliath battle against bureaucracy. Others say it's a disgraceful example of the lack of a proper consultation process with a long list of stakeholders. But we just wanted to make it work. What shocks me is not that we adapted the club-

house ourselves, but that so many similar existing park buildings are not available to their neighbourhoods in the same way.

### **Here's how it happened:**

The Dufferin Grove rink house, completely rebuilt in 1993, had too many walls and not enough windows. During rink season, it was impossible for the rink staff to keep an eye on whatever foolishness might be going on in the separate, walled-off change rooms. Parents couldn't stay warm and watch their kids out on the ice at the same time – there were no eye-level windows to the outside. (All the windows started three meters up.) The retired Italian construction workers, who had begun



*squeezed into girls change room*

to use the rink house every day to play cards, were jammed in by the wall in the boys' change room. When the mayor came to give



*squeezed into the boys side*

her oven-opening speech in October, she had to stand in the hall.

I asked Tino, our new recreation supervisor, "how can we get rid of some of these walls and make a more usable room?" He said, talk to the director. I called

Mario Zanetti, and he sent out a building inspector.

We showed the building inspector the two concrete-block walls we wanted to be taken out, to make one big, flexible-use room. We asked him – if these walls are removed, will the building fall down? He showed us the big steel beams holding up the roof. The interior walls were not bearing walls. They wouldn't be hard

to remove, he said, but it would be expensive. He estimated that for the City to remove the smaller wall (about ten feet long) that blocked the staff's view into the girls' change room would cost \$6000. The bigger wall, separating the two change rooms, would cost about \$10,000. "I can see that it would be a good idea," he said. "But you'd better get busy fundraising."

We didn't want to use our time to have bake sales; we wanted to work with families, to get them back into the rink, dilute the youth ghetto, mix it up, bring all sorts of people together. We had a key to the building, and we'd tried to make it as nice as we could, but it was not a pleasant space to be in. Everybody told us – "great idea, a clubhouse with one big community room – but taking walls out will cost money that the City doesn't have."



*Folk dancers had no space*

We wondered how you remove a concrete block wall. One weekend a park friend came with a spike and hammer to try out a technique he had heard about. If you just chip away the mortar, a construction friend had told him, you can lift the block right out and start on the next one. A few of us came over to watch. It was really easy.

So we took out the smaller wall. It took four hours for five of us. Suddenly the view into the girls' change room had opened up. The whole place looked bigger.

When we confessed to city management what we'd done, there was some finger-wagging at City Hall. But at the same time we had the impression that the city staff got a bit of a laugh. The story spread. Everyone knew that the change made sense,



*The first wall is opened up*

but no one had thought there was a way to make it happen.

The city sent in a carpenter to fix the edges where the wall had been removed. Then we asked for an interior window in the staff office, facing the change room, so that the staff could see what was going on in there. That window was put in by a city crew, without any mention of the cost. We called our city councillor, Mario Silva, to come out and have a look. We asked him, would he be willing to get his Council colleagues to approve money to put four eye-level windows into the rink house, two in each room, so people could see out, and parents could watch their kids out on the ice? And could they be windows that opened, so the building could get some air circulation in the summer? He said, “I'll see what I can do.”

He came through for us. The city hired two window installers and they had it all done in two days – four windows, each with a quarter section that opened. Suddenly the outside world reappeared, in this formerly sealed-off concrete capsule which had looked so much like a prison holding-cell.

The windows were so useful that we knew we had to go the next step. One Saturday morning in October, ten park friends came to the rink with gloves and overalls and dismantled the middle wall separating the two change rooms. It took longer than the first time, to loosen and take down all those blocks – almost 12 hours – but as the wall got lower and lower and the window on the other side of



*Eye-level windows at last*

the wall came into view, it was a thrill to see the red leaves of the maple tree outside. Finally, the rink house was one good room, allowing a community clubhouse.

Over the next several years, a few more changes were made, piece by piece as they were needed or as money came available. The window openings were too small to let in much air, so we used the final \$700 Dufferin Mall donation to get a carpenter to replace one of the windows with casements. The grandmother of a little skater donated a Maytag stove, so the rink house began smelling like cookies baking instead of only stale hockey bags. In 1996 the City gave us a “Food and Hunger Action” grant to convert the office, and the slop room across the entry hall, into two halves of a community kitchen. The same year, we sent the Maytree Foundation an old photo from the 1930’s, showing a woodstove in a general store with people gathered around it: would the Foundation be willing to fund a woodstove for the rink house? To our delight, they were willing. When



*Converting the office into the Zamboni Cafe*

it was installed, the city paid for a little wrought iron fence around it, for safety. The fence had an extra bar for drying wet mittens, used countless times since then.



The rink change room’s fluorescent lights were ugly and made people look greenish in the evening, so we begged \$1000 of track lights from Home Depot. They said no, at first, and then changed their minds and presented us with the lights on St. Valentine’s Day.

The softer, focused lighting made a huge difference in the long winter evenings – people stayed and played chess, and more youth started bringing their dates on Fridays. After skating, they could drink hot chocolate with their girlfriends and watch the flames in the woodstove together.



*Friends meet in the rinkhouse*

Then in 2003, the City gave us another kitchen grant to add a second small kitchen in an unused alcove in the zamboni garage. That addition was a bit more complicated, so the G.H.Wood Foundation topped it up with an \$8000 grant to let us finish. The second kitchen made community suppers possible, and its proximity to the bake ovens (we added a second smaller oven in 2000) reduced the public health officials' qualms about food safety.

### **How much it cost:**

The Dufferin Grove adaptation costs were as follows: Wall removal: \$0 (volunteer). Edging of remaining walls: \$1000.



*The second kitchen*

Observation window in office: \$800. Windows: \$8000. Casement window: \$700. Track lights: \$1000. Woodstove: \$3500. Installation and cast iron fence: \$700. Inside kitchen: \$6925. Maytag stove: \$750. Zamboni kitchen: \$28,000. Total cost: \$51,375 (\$2500 spent by the city directly; the rest, donations and grants, and volunteer labour).

In this way the existing 3-month-a-year rink house was changed into a small year-round

neighbourhood clubhouse. This happened without a middle man, architect or otherwise – step by step and piecemeal, as useful changes suggested themselves to park users and rink staff, and as City or Foundation money became available.

### **What happened next:**

The formerly single-use rink house acquired new possibilities when the changes were made. People came into the rink house

and sat down in the big room with their friends, talking and drinking hot chocolate and slowly getting their skates on. Out on the ice, they played shinny hockey for hours and then they got hungry, and went



back inside and ate mini-pizzas or soup, and drank coffee. Parents sat in front of the woodstove with their children, reading them storybooks. The old men played card games for hours, and got their coffee for free, “since we worked so hard for this country.”



Sometimes musicians brought their instruments, using the echo-y concrete blocks to good effect. There was enough room to fit in a farmers' market eventually, when it

was too cold to have it outside along the path. On those days, the zamboni parked out on the basketball court, to make room for more farmers in the garage.

In spring, summer, and fall, the clubhouse became a staging area for dance festivals, outdoor theatre, and cultural events. Park



staff and park friends used the kitchens to turn out snack bar food and community suppers and café snacks and miles of park cookies (if they were laid end to end). All this food became the heart of an ever-expanding number of social encounters, spreading throughout the park.

There was room to do a neighbourhood “clothing swap” once a year, and to set up a “tasting fair” with food cooked by local chefs, and to sometimes make

up a bed for homeless park visitors. Youth came to borrow basketballs or build skateboard ramps. These youth, and younger kids too, knew that they could come into the clubhouse to seek the staff’s protection, if there were bullies or fights.



*The Zamboni Café is open*

One way that all this liveliness would have been stopped before it started is if the City had charged a permit fee for people to use the building, or for programs offered there. But the rink house was an orphan at the start. Nobody (including our little group) thought that the free availability of the space would layer so many activities and encounters on top of each other. It happened because we had more or less unencumbered use of public space: essential for that sociability and new friendships to begin.

## The farmers' market

In May of 2001, Elizabeth Harris started the first park farmers' market in Toronto, at Riverdale Farm near Parliament and Gerrard, every Tuesday afternoon. It was an organic market, and Elizabeth asked whether somebody from Dufferin Grove would be willing to come and sell bread. The sixty loaves two of us amateur bakers were able to bring were always sold in half an hour, since Elizabeth had laid the groundwork well and lots of people came.

*Elizabeth Harris*

In February 2002, the Dufferin Grove newsletter ran a query from park friend, Anne Freeman: would people in the neighborhood be interested in a Dufferin Grove farmers' market on the model of Riverdale market? There was lots of enthusiasm, but the Toronto Parks bureaucracy had grown enormously and the obstacles seemed daunting.

That June, Dufferin Grove had “official” park bakers for the first time: Anna Bekerman, Jenny Cook, and Caitlin Shea (who were working at the park already) stepped up to bake for Riverdale market on their off-day. Bread production went up immediately, but the trip across town in mid-afternoon was always a cliffhanger. (Baking all day, then loading up a borrowed car with the table, the baskets of bread, the cutting board, knives, butter, cleaning supplies, fanny pouch with enough change, bags, tablecloth, then getting stuck in the heavy cross-town traffic, setting up late, etc. etc.)

Vendors at farmers' markets talk to each other a lot. One day in October near the end of the second Riverdale Market



*Photo: Laura Bernau*

season, two farmers were talking to us (Dufferin Grove bakers) about wanting a second location in the west. They said they'd like to carry on selling through the winter. One was a baker as well as a grower, the other

had lots of storage vegetables, and both were convinced that a year-round farmers' market made it much easier for farmers to build a regular customer base.

The Parks manager of that time said he was willing to try a market at Dufferin Grove, since there seemed to be a lot of community enthusiasm. Word had spread fast, because of the park newsletter and because the park web site and a neighbourhood e-list had been started by two park friends. So it was resolved to do a west-end market following the good model that Elizabeth Harris had worked out with the farmers at Riverdale.

On the first Thursday in November 2002, the farmers set up a spectacular display of produce, pies, and meat. The park bakers had an overflowing bread table. The contrast between the clammy fall day outside and the cornucopia inside the rink house was astonishing. For their part, the farmers were surprised by the immediate warm welcome they got from the many market visitors. And the market customers found, from the very beginning, that it took a long time to shop, because there were so many familiar faces, and so much news to exchange. Not more than a year later, Anne Freeman took on the running of the market, and it's been going strong ever since.



Photo: Laura Berman



Anne Freeman

## Arie

*Arie Kamp was the most assiduous gardener the park had during its time as a commons.*

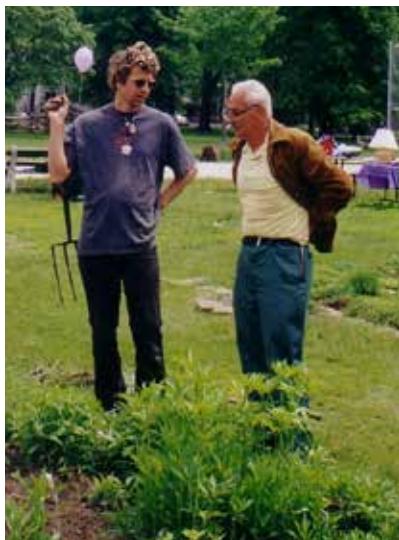
*From Arie:* “I was born in Holland, in 1926, the oldest of six boys. My parents were farm labourers. After the war I left and came to Canada. First I was an agricultural labourer – a farmhand – that’s nothing to be proud of, to be called a farmhand or a peasant, but it cannot be denied. Then I was a steelworker in Hamilton for 21 years, at Stelco. It was just like hell with the lid off. It was unbelievable. So I saved my money and retired at 52. I had never married, and I was able to live from my savings until I was old enough to start getting my government pension. I was husbanding my savings very carefully and I still am.

“The way I got involved was that some years after I retired, I was walking around the park and I met you when you, Jutta, were weeding a flowerbed. Since I had been interested in growing flowers since childhood, I decided to offer my services in order to beat the boredom of approaching old age. I had a little plot in my father’s garden when I was a child, and then I didn’t have anywhere to grow flowers again until I came to the park.

“When I was gardening there, people often asked me why I would be working for many hours without any pay. As a rule, Canadians are not keen to do that kind of thing. I remember one Portuguese woman – I was working near the basketball court – who was wondering why



*Arie Kamp*



an old man was working while the young people were at play. She couldn't get over that.

"But I had so much time on my hands. You cannot just sit in the library all day. So I worked 4 or 5 hours in the park most days. The exception was one day when I worked twelve hours, because a big supplies of spring flowers came from the parks staff and I wanted to prevent them wilting and get the job over with. But normally I was getting up at 6 o'clock in the morning and then watering and working until noon and then I went home for a little nap and didn't come back until the next day.

"I liked making my own decisions in the gardens. Sometimes I met some resistance. But I eventually got my own way. I don't like to be regimented. I usually knew more about gardening, even though I hadn't gardened much as an adult. I told people that in the summertime I'm a garden rat and in the wintertime I turn into a library rat. And then there's chess, which is my lifesaver. But gardening was my main hobby. It never occurred to me to try to grow flowers for a living. It pays very poorly.

"I was always looking out for good seeds. When I saw a flower I liked, in somebody's garden, I would go to the door and

ask for permission to gather the seed. I never bought any plants. I planted the seeds in the park, as well as the bedding plants the Parks staff brought from the High Park greenhouse. I grew Japanese morning glories up the rink

*Arie gets an "unsung hero" award*



fence. I got much acclaim for them. And when I grew Shirley poppies that I got from seed I gathered, people took many pictures of those flowerbeds.

"People would just start talking to me in the park, about my hobby and where I came from and how old I was and what I was doing for a living. Eventually I got to be well-known in the neigh-

bourhood. Gardening in the park got me so many connections. Otherwise I would never have met people, socialized with people. That was the side benefit. All on account of my gardening.”

## Gene

Gene Threndyle, artist and landscaper, led the native species plantings at the park for years. There were long periods (unlike now) when City Forestry didn’t plant many, or any, new trees. But Gene worked with park friends and school classes to plant little areas of native trees and bushes, protected from dogs and frisbee players by split-rail or cedar pole fences until the plantings could get established. One of these areas is called the “marsh fountain.” From Gene:

“When I applied to the Arts Council for funds to make the marsh fountain, it wasn’t nearly enough money. Our total budget was only \$10,000. I mean, the reservoir was made out of an old lime bucket with holes drilled in it. I’m not a plumber. I made up that reservoir, to keep the water at a certain level – it was designed to leak, so if there was heavy, heavy rain, it wouldn’t form a lake. It was supposed to be a marsh as opposed to a pond.



*Gene Threndyle*

“The project likely got accepted in the first place because there was so much going on in the park already. It worked for about five or six years, but there were problems with it right from the beginning. Everything was done in the cheapest way we could make things work. It was a fountain, I mean the water had to pour into something. So my idea was to

have three stainless steel bowls at different heights, with the water pouring from one to the next. Bowls as a symbol, because the cooks used stainless steel bowls in the park kitchens, and there was so much food being made in the park. But getting the bowls spun took about \$4000. That was the most expensive part of the grant.

“The way the fountain worked was so idiosyncratic that I always had to go down and tinker with it. So it was a kind of dark cloud that followed me around. I made more than a few mistakes. If Tom Feeney, the city’s head plumber, wasn’t such a nice guy, the fountain wouldn’t have worked at all. Because he always went out of his way, he did lots of tinkering as well, trying to make it work.

“The middle of the bureaucracy does seem to be where you find the people that are easiest to work with. If something is interesting, and not their usual job, they seem to want to put their hand to it.

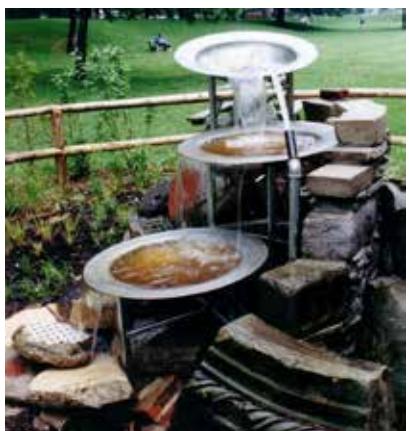
“City Parks staff gave us about twenty old stone sculptural heads, saved from when so many old buildings were being demolished all over the city. They were being stored in the back forty behind the High Park greenhouse, just sitting there. So we asked if we could use them for the marsh fountain and they said, sure, and brought them over in a truck. Then they sent a guy with a backhoe to dig out the marsh area and position the stones. They were a big help.

“You have to be a certain age to volunteer in parks. I was young, 39 or 40. I know older people can do some things, but by then they can’t do so much. On the other hand when you’re very young, you likely aren’t grounded enough to be a whole lot of help. But there seems to be a magical period somewhere between 35 and 45. Those people in the middle can really do a lot of stuff. They’ve still got energy and they still want to experiment. And they want to be involved in their community, and do stuff with people. I got other friends to come and help.

“Before I ever got involved, I remember seeing Dufferin Grove Park, when I’d be driving along Dufferin Street, and think-



ing that it looked like it could be interesting, but just figuring well, it's a Toronto city park, it's probably just a little piece of lawn



*The Marsh Garden*

there was some money from Canada Trust to plant native species gardens he came and told me about it. That's when I first came over to offer my help as a gardener.

“One of the first things we did was around the bake oven. I started sourcing native plants, because you had the Canada Trust grant. We did some planting down by the playground and we even made raised beds under the Norway maples, with quite nice bent-twig fences around them. It was an experiment to see if we could make something grow under those Norway maples, because generally you can't. And we couldn't either, but we were crazy enough to try.”



*Hepatica under the maples*

## Vandalism

*Jutta's story:* One dark and windy evening in November, cycling through the park, I came across a group of young guys breaking



up all of Gene's twig fences around the wildflowers just for fun, while they were having a drinking party at the playground. I yelled at them to stop, but they threatened to beat me up. I

cycled home and called the police (no cell phone), and told the dispatcher I was going right back, to face down that group some more while I waited for the cruiser to arrive. So then the police came fairly quickly, in three cars, and caught the most energetic vandal. It turned out that he had been in trouble in various somewhat more serious ways. In the (long) process of trying to follow his case through court, part-time staff Lily Weston and I spoke to judges, crown attorneys, defence lawyers, and probation officers, and we tried to make many people aware of the effects of vandalism and threatening behaviour in parks. Even though the vandalism charge was later mislaid by the police and therefore never went to court, we learned the young suspect's name, and all our court-visiting paid off. One day we got a call from the probation department saying that the same young man had been ordered by the court to perform 50 hours of community service for an unrelated charge (shoving a police officer). He was willing to do the hours at our park. This meant we were able to talk to him quite a bit. This young man was unusual in that he, when drinking, did more damage than vandals normally do. We found out that when he was sober, he was also able to do more constructive work than court-ordered workers generally do. Among other things, he built us an excellent insulating barrier for the door of the oven, which otherwise lets out some heat during baking.



*court-ordered community work*

structures got much less damage than one would expect.

We tried to show him, when he was sober, how a good park works. Other youth in the park saw that the park staff would follow through on vandalism. The adults got respect for that, and the ovens, the buildings, the benches, the gardens, and the playground

## **Henry Curtis helps out**

A park friend brought in an old book that gave us a boost, “The Play Movement and its Significance,” a best-seller in 1917, 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.” P.62*

*“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.” P.64*

*“The playground with its social centre is a sort of public settlement, and it is highly desirable that the director should live in the neighbourhood, if possible, and become a part of the community. In fact, it is almost impossible that the playground should be that sort of social force, that melting pot of the races, which it ought to be unless the director becomes a part of that community.” P.129*

*“..the director...must know the games of the children, the folk dances, the athletics, and he should know, also, something of dramatics, story-telling, pageantry, camping, conducting excursions, gardening, and industrial work [crafts].....” P.133*

We had no playground “director” with such a wonderful range of skills, but we could see that if the park’s playground staff could be persuaded to get involved in the broader range of activities we had begun, the workload of park friends would become more manageable. A much closer connection with local park staff would increase the chances that the park kids, and maybe even their parents, would find a “social centre” at the park even if all of the park friends got tired and left.



## Lin

One of our teachers about local governance has been Elinor Ostrom – everyone called her “Lin” – who taught political theory at Indiana University in Bloomington until her death in 2012. Professor Ostrom shared the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2009, for her work on “governing the commons.” In November 2010 seven of us (two from CELOS, five park staff) made the 12-hour drive in two cars to Indiana to meet her. We brought along a list of ten principles of governance that we got from reading her work, and we

*Elinor Ostrom*

had a travelling seminar in the cars on the trip down. When we got there, we found that Ostrom’s institute is called the “Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis.” It has that name, Ostrom told us, because she and her husband, also a political scientist, both did a lot of woodworking during their summer breaks from the university. They built a log cabin on some land they bought on Manitoulin Island, and made most of the furniture themselves. They like the term workshop because in a workshop people have to fit wood – or governance theories – together with care. Ostrom also told us that their cabin had no electricity. They



had a generator to pump their water, and they adapted the water pump to run their computers and their printer as well. Then they sat down and wrote.

Ostrom's writings, and these stories that she told us, made us think she was our kind of analyst.

She was frank and unsentimental when writing about the problems that come between people in shared spaces: "In the absence of effective sanctions for people who shirk working on solutions, or who free-ride on the work of others, the rest will feel like suckers and will most likely quit trying."

## Staffing the Park

The "free ride" problem which Ostrom pointed out is only one item in her governance list. But it's the problem that can extinguish good efforts in public spaces everywhere. Everyone knows of some community group which subdivided into five or six committees with great ideas, then dwindled to a few people with far more on their task list than they had time for -- and finally the group disappeared. There were not enough park friends motivated to do all that unpaid work.



*Staff and park friends worked together*

And why should there be? In the case of public spaces, we have a tax-supported civil service. We pool our money to pay municipal staff to make parks work well, among other things. So



*Staff scheduling meeting*

park litter pickers are paid a much higher hourly wage than the part-time recreation staff whose job is working with families and youth. But even so, job applicants for recreation program jobs at Dufferin Grove kept getting better and better. The work was interesting, and – very importantly – the low wages were partly compensated by the flexibility of part-time work schedules. University students, both undergraduate and graduate, began to apply, as well as actors, dancers, cooks, yoga teachers, translators, and neighbourhood mothers of young children. The advantages of flexible hours, and the friendly and adventuresome culture of the Dufferin Grove work crew, were an incentive for them to apply for a City part-time worker's job despite the low wages. Some of the staff returned to working at the park for many seasons, in between their other work or study commitments.

That meant that staff turnover came to be much lower than normal for city part-time workers. With more experienced staff, used to working closely with park users, the park programs became steadily more ambitious.

from the very beginning, it seemed best to work hand in hand with park staff at Dufferin Grove, and to encourage good people to apply for those jobs.

Now, it's a little-known fact that



*Staff helped at events*

# Food

## Dan and Lea

Lea Ambros and Dan DeMatteis became good friends during their time as students at King's College in Halifax. They both ended up in Toronto after their student days were done, and



*Dan DeMatteis*

both were drawn to working at the park, particularly to using the wood ovens. Lea became one of the park coordinators for a time, doing every job, but Dan went off to apprentice at restaurants. Then he came back, ready to do more cooking in the wood ovens. A bit of history:

*Jutta's park diary, January 18, 2003:*

"The rink had something new tonight:  
Friday Night Supper. Since park cook

Dan DeMatteis is back, I asked him and Lea Ambros a couple of weeks ago if they'd like to try cooking a big meal once a week.

The weekends have been so crowded at the rink, but Friday nights are different. The kids who don't have dates at clubs come to the rink and hang around looking dissatisfied and swearing at each other. We need to get some families in there, to mix it up a bit better. Lots of people with young children are worn out at the end of the work week. I thought they might like to come to the rink and eat supper there and have a skate, get the kids good and tired, and then go home with no dishes to wash. Even for people without kids, a skate around the rink, with a cheap, tasty supper might be a nice way to end the week. Dan and Lea said yes – they both like a challenge.



*Lea Ambros*

So the two of them worked all day cooking dinner. Their idea was that they would use mostly market food, so I put it into the market newsletter for this week: Seasonal food from the Thursday organic farmers' market: \$5 a plate. Depending on what's available at the farmers' market, the cooks may also offer soup, antipasto, and/or dessert, which will be extra.

The temperature dropped to minus 18 celsius in the evening, and we thought nobody would come. But over forty people came, counting the kids, and there was only a little bit of food left at the end. The staff had set up some long tables, with tablecloths. Strangers talked to each other, the windows were all frosted over with the cold, the rink house was full of good food smells, red-faced skaters got to thaw out by the wood stove – beautiful. The Friday night loud-mouths were there too. They were puzzled but not hostile.”



*Friday Night Supper in winter*

### **From the park newsletter, August 2003**

“On August 1, Dan DeMatteis and Lea Ambros made an experimental dinner of Beretta’s Meats organic beef heart, tongue, and oxtail. That one was never fully sold out, but the meat-eaters who switched to vegetarian on that day, missed a delicious meal. Out-of-town visitor Dayo Okunlola told us that where he comes from in Nigeria, those parts of the cow - the organs and the heart, tongue, tail - are the most expensive parts of the animal. Here they are sold off cheap or made into pet food. But the philosophy of using the whole animal - as people traditionally did,

when waste was not an option for anybody - was expressed at that Friday night dinner.

“Dinner price and philosophy: At \$5 for the main plate and between \$1.50 and \$2 for the soup, the salad, and the dessert, it’s hard to spend



*Summer supper*

more than \$10 per person for supper at the park. Considering that much of the food is organically grown by local farmers, this is obviously not a money-making venture. It's not meant to be. It's also not meant to provide a 'bargain.' The point is to celebrate local food and make a good place

for neighbours to meet, as well

*Supper prep*

as to ease the burden of work on young families. Friday night supper is when you can change out of your week work clothes,

round up the kids and meet your friends at the park - no cooking and few dishes, and the kids can run around with other neighbourhood children until they're so tired they're ready to drop into bed.

“There has been some unhappiness by peo-

ple wanting to book birthday parties at Friday night supper. With very few exceptions, the answer to such large group bookings is no. It's a wonderful way to have a bargain birthday party, but any block bookings will displace the ordinary supper scene that we intended. Birthday parties can be booked separately through Dufferin Park Youth Works. Big birthday parties are another wonderful form of sociability in the park, and we honour them: only not at Friday night supper.”



*Photo: Laura Berman*

*friends meeting*



*Photo: Laura Berman*

## **From the newsletter, June 2006**

Director *Kate Cayley*: “We are pleased to announce the third annual Cooking Fire Theatre Festival, a weeklong performance extravaganza celebrating theatre, food and public space in Toronto’s Dufferin Grove Park….

Delicious organic meals will be served to the audience over cooking fires and from Dufferin Grove Park’s two wood-fired outdoor community bake ovens. Dan DeMatteis, who cooked at the park in years past but now works for Jamie Kennedy, will be back just for that week to work with the park cooks.”



### **Jamie**

Chef Jamie Kennedy has left his mark on a lot of people and places, including Dufferin Grove Park.

When we first decided to try Friday Night Supper, we put up posters all over the rink house to let people know. The week before the suppers began, Jamie Kennedy came skating with his

young sons, and he read the posters. We introduced him to the cooks. He was very enthusiastic about the changes at the park – the zamboni café, the ovens, the farmers’ market, and now some good meals on Fridays. We felt like we had got the famous chef’s stamp of approval, before we even began. The suppers flourished, and the Friday Night bad-mood-youth-ghetto mellowed right out.



*Photo: Google images*

*Jamie Kennedy*

Park staff Dan DeMatteis decided not long after that he wanted to cook all the time, and he left for Italy to apprentice. There he and Jamie Kennedy ran into each other again, at the Slow Food convention in Turin, and Jamie asked Dan about the Friday Night suppers. They talked for a long time, and got on

well. At the end of the convention, Jamie offered Dan a job at one of his restaurants back in Toronto.

Dan worked for Jamie, and learned from him, for some years. Then Dan became a chef at another restaurant, and dreamed of opening his own place. Sometimes he came back to the park as a guest cook for the Cooking Fire Theatre Festival, or just to meet friends at Friday Night Supper – which by then had spread over the lawn all around the bake oven during summer, with several hundred people, including many children, coming to eat good food.

Then, in June of 2012, Dan suddenly died, of a blood clot in his lungs. Jamie Kennedy was one of the speakers at the memorial service, very shaky and sad, as was everyone else there. Since then, Dan's friends have sometimes gathered at Friday Night Supper on the anniversary to talk over the old stories.

Meantime, on Thursdays at the farmers' market and on Fridays for the warm-weather suppers, the hillside and all around the ovens is full of people sitting together on the grass, eating good food cooked by other talented cooks on the staff, and enjoying one another's company. Sometimes I have to rub my eyes, thinking back of the earlier times when all this began, before there was an oven or a market, before Dan and Lea started the suppers, and the hillside was mostly empty.

In 2014, on the last farmers' market Thursday in August, market manager Anne Freeman invited some guest cooks to the market. They were cooking fries using Ontario organic potatoes. They tossed them in a giant bowl with sea salt and thyme and sold them in paper cones, in the old style. Word got around how good the fries were, and soon there was a long lineup.

It turned out that the cooks, working away at their deep fryer in



*Father and sons*

the middle of all the farmers and the talkers and the eaters, were Jamie Kennedy's sons, Micah, Jackson and Nile.

So many threads come together.

## Money

Many of the stories in this booklet are backed by money. If the Duffeirn Mall hadn't got in trouble with the neighbours and therefore offered a lets-make-up donation of \$20,000 for the playground, I would never have called around for two days to find out what the park neighbours wanted to do with that money. Nor would we have got the artists to enliven the Big Backyard adventure playground. If we hadn't got the \$3000 award from the Toronto Community Foundation, we would never have met Pat MacKay and got the \$10,000 Trillium grant that helped us to start to fix up the rink house and to imagine building a bake oven. If we hadn't put the kitchen in the rink house and built the bake oven, the park would never have had all that donation income from people who wanted the bread or Friday Night Supper or a snack at the zamboni café. If we hadn't had all those donations



*Keeping track of the money*

contracts, they would never have decided to join the city workforce. And so on.

Twelve years after we began, we formed a non-profit organization called the Centre for Local Research into Public Space (CELOS). A few years later, we got charitable status, and that allowed us to make applications to funding organizations. We were always an outsider group. Most charitable funding is

for so much good food, we would never have been able to lure all those adventuresome people to help with the “practical research” at the park and think up more fun. If those people hadn't been introduced to park projects through the research

needed for established non-governmental agencies that depend on such grants to meet their payroll, so that they can do the work that government can't do because of its complex bureaucracy. But even though we were outsiders, we got one-time grants that helped build the bake-oven, the kitchens, the benches, the web sites, and – most importantly – helped pay imaginative contract workers to try special projects.

Other times the money came as a gift, unasked for. A mid-wife decided to give \$2000 to staff a morning drop-in for young

families at the rink clubhouse. An ex-mayor steered a \$10,000 project surplus to us, to expand the bake-oven program. A stock-market investor gave us \$700 to buy a portable tandoor that we could lend out to the Thorncliffe Women's Committee during the four years it took the city



*Zakia and Sabina pick up the portable tandoor*

to install a permanent tandoor in their neighbourhood park. The same person donated another \$700 to keep three “sister” outdoor skating rinks (Dufferin, Wallace, and Campbell) open and staffed on Christmas Day and Boxing Day, when the city had scheduled all city rinks to be locked.

Not all gifts were attached to a specific project. A foundation that was winding down its affairs asked if we could use a bit of their left-over funds – did we have anything we'd like to do? The donor of the tandoor called up to say he had made an unexpected amount on his stocks – did we have anything we'd like to do? A relative left us \$10,000 in his will, to do whatever we thought was best.

Such gifts, when put to use by people who had ideas and wanted to test them, built sociability and surprise into the park. Money, when used that way, brought freedom, including the freedom to make mistakes, confess them, and learn from them.

In a public place where money is being used in untried ways – to add new programs, for example – it’s important to document where that money goes. Another gift we got was a Quickbooks lesson from an accountant friend of the park: so that every \$9.49 for a large bag of pizza cheese, and every \$40 to pay for work, could be entered into Quickbooks and published on our website. When money is around, suspicion of misuse is not far away. There have been a few outbreaks of innuendo. Having public access to our financial documentation didn’t always stop gossip, but at least the numbers were always available – in long, long columns – for whoever wanted to see them.

## CELOS

We chose the acronym CELOS (pronounced “see-loss”) because we wanted it to sound like CIDOC, the “research by people” institute of our friend, historian and philosopher Ivan Illich, which existed in Mexico in the 1960’s and 70’s.



When our little organization began at Dufferin Grove Park, we started doing what we called “theoretical and practical research” citywide and beyond, into what makes public spaces – like parks – more hospitable and more lively. We’ve been researching what works and what doesn’t, and we’ve documented a lot of what we’ve seen and done, for sixteen years now. The “objects” accepted by Canada Revenue – what we’re allowed to do as a charity – are:

*To conduct and disseminate research on the use of neighbourhood public parks and other public commons areas;*

*To establish and operate a resource library to enable members of the public to deepen their knowledge about the use of neighbourhood public parks and other public commons areas; and*

*To undertake activities ancillary and incidental to the attainment of the aforementioned charitable objects.*

That’s a pretty wide net we’re casting.

While gifts of money helped a lot over the years at Dufferin Grove Park, nothing would have changed if people hadn't been willing to try things. Because the park was, for a time, a commons, that meant that a lot of people felt like using their talents, sometimes for no money, sometimes for just enough to cover their costs without counting the minutes. Some examples:



*Alan Carlisle*

### **Alan Carlisle**

*From Alan Carlisle, a contractor and inventor who donated his labour and ingenuity to build a different kind of food cart for the park:*

“Here’s my attempt at describing the significance of local neighbourhood guidance of public resources. At Dufferin Grove, inspired citizens stepped up. They championed public enjoyment of common

spaces, without the drag of the public sector managers creating kingdoms of mediocrity and status-quo convenience. Instead there were down to earth activities that have a universal and visceral appeal....gardening, food preparation, wood oven cooking and baking, and some of the home spun crafts and skills that are cherished all over. They wanted to explore alternatives to the hot dog, appealing and delicious.

They tracked down local knowledge, looking for classic street food of different continents. So a very successful food program that sold favourites from other cultures was born. It created a tangible example of how real, meaningful public engagement can overcome road blocks in Recreation and public policy...”



*The food cart, painted*

## Claire

*From Claire Freeman-Fawcett, who got involved at the park by donating her help at the zamboni café when she was still a kid:*



*Claire Freeman-Fawcett  
was so much life and energy at the park! People were very curious about the cob project and eager to pitch in and help.*

“My involvement with the park started when I was only nine, when my family had just moved into the neighbourhood. The staff at the winter snack bar in the rink house were so friendly. So I asked my parents if they could get permission for me to help out there sometimes on the weekends. The staff said yes, and put a big apron on me. That was the start. Then later, when I turned sixteen, I got a part-time job working as a staff member at the wading pool and snack bar. It was the summer the cob structure was built and there

Over the years that I worked at the park I came to really see the benefit of our community building through experimentation – trying things, and acting on park users’ suggestions. Engaging people through a combination of food, playfulness, curiosity, and good old fashioned elbow grease, be it baking bread at five in the morning, cooking over campfires with teenagers, or cleaning the bathrooms so people can enjoy the park, remains for me a model of community involvement: broadly applicable and also practical and fun.”

*In June 2009,  
the Thorncliffe Park  
Women’s Committee  
asked CELOS for  
help in starting a  
weekly bazaar in the  
park. Claire was  
one of the people who went there to help out with children’s activities. She  
described the bazaar in a piece she wrote at the time:*



*The Women’s Committee invited us for tea  
between the hours of 6:00pm and 9:00pm. When we arrive around 4:30 to*

“The bazaar gets progressively more crowded between the hours of 6:00pm and 9:00pm. When we arrive around 4:30 to



*Arts and crafts at the bazaar*

begin setup the park is almost empty. By six o'clock more people start flowing in, and by closing-time at nine o'clock, the park is absolutely full of people. The enormous school yard, which opens into the park, and packed with portable classrooms, becomes so full by nine

that it looks like a school day at recess....When we are about ready to pack up, and I look around and see so many people enjoying themselves, talking, laughing and gossiping in many languages, and making purchases while their kids are covered in paint and glue, I feel tremendously happy to be there. It is an on-going process of figuring things out that I feel privileged to witness and participate in.”



*The Thorncriff Park Friday bazaar*

## **Georgie: the cob courtyard**

They say that every cloud has a silver lining and that seems to be borne out at the park, with the cob building project, one of the biggest gifts-in-kind the park ever got, led by Georgie Donais. By the time the cob courtyard/café was finished, Georgie had counted more than 500 people who had given an hour or a day or the



*Georgie Donais*

whole summer to help with building.

What happened: Late in the summer of 2004, Toronto Public Health inspectors told us to get proper sinks for food preparation installed by the wading pool for the following summer, or stop having snacks at the playground food cart.

A crisis. Park friend Georgie Donais said – “if we have to have sinks, we can back them with a community-built cob courtyard and make something beautiful.” With the help of a \$2500 grant from the Toronto Parks and Trees Foundation, she set about working with many park friends to build a little courtyard around the sinks, and continuing on from there, to create

an outdoor gathering-place. The courtyard walls are made with a sand-clay-straw mix known as “cob” or “monolithic adobe”, which was mixed by foot and applied by hand. Silvie Varone and Simon Evans, who lived just up the street, were skilled carpenters who normally worked on theatre sets – made barn-board-and-mosaic counters for the public health sinks that the city plumbers installed. The city electricians did the wiring. The cob café is an old form of building but with up-to-date wiring and plumbing.



*Some of the cobbing crew*



*The cob café, ten years later*

Many people who came to look at the cob courtyard the first year it was built wondered whether it could last the winter. Georgie said that there are two cob buildings north of Thornhill, a house and a church, which were built in the 1830's and are still in use. Some cob houses in England are over 500 years old. A park friend from Yemen showed us photos of 700-year old cob houses there. So we're hoping that this cob courtyard will last many, many winters – and indeed, after ten years it's still standing solid.



*Georgie and her daughter*

## Bio-toilet

The cob courtyard was an occasion when an outpouring of donated work produced a useful and beautiful gift for the park. The following year the opposite happened – an \$8000 donation of a state-of-the art bio-toilet designed for use in public space, together with many hours of work to house the unit, encountered so many blocks that the gift could never be given.

*From Georgie:* “The bio-toilet project was the second environmentally-aware project that was community-instigated in the park. Friends of the park, including front-line staff, were planning to create and maintain a beautiful and compact earthen building housing a state-of-the-art waterless toilet facility. It was our hope that it would serve both as a close-by toilet for park goers, and as a kind of inspiration to other neighbourhoods and cities about what could be achieved when a community worked together. However, elements of the surrounding community and some levels of city government were unable to see the value in the enterprise. They worked with incredible vigour in an effort to stop the project, which they eventually did.

“Toronto may eventually catch up in its environmental

awareness and creativity at the institutional level, but meanwhile, it continues to engage those who envision more for the city in a game of regulatory cat and mouse. Until that changes, the city will never have the supportive community-building of somewhere like Portland, the innovative composting toilet solutions as taken on by places like Newmarket, Vancouver and Edmonton, or the brilliant-use-of-space alleyway housing as in a city like Kyoto.

“It’s Toronto’s loss, and no one’s gain.”

The bio-toilet actually had a lot of public support in the neighbourhood, partly because the cob courtyard had got so many people excited about working with their neighbours to solve a park problem. There had been years of requests from parents and caregivers to have a bathroom nearer the playground, but the cost was said to be too high. The bio-toilet seemed to be an environmentally interesting solution in a number of ways, and one that would be relatively cheap. There were several well-attended public meetings, and the city hired local designer-builder Rohan Walters, to explore ways in which the donated bio-toilet unit could be installed and still conform to the traditional building code. Rohan worked with an engineer to present some alternatives, more costly than the cob housing originally envisioned, but still cheaper than a standard bricks-and-mortar public washroom. But by then the issue was too polarized. The foundation was first turned into a bench and then ploughed over, and the bio-toilet gift went somewhere else.



*The bench built on the bio-toilet foundation*

## Rohan

*From designer-builder Rohan Walters:* “Our Toronto population is not exposed to enough good, alternative science that would help them demand, for instance, a better public toilet, water and waste-water solution such as already exists elsewhere. Such innovations are being made even better as we speak, yet Torontonians are only exposed to the same old status quo – insufficient and declining methods that only people satisfied with 19th century industrial methodologies would be happy with.

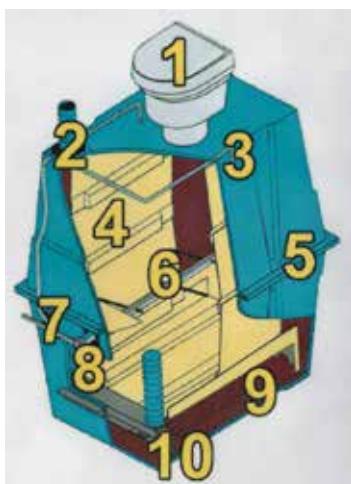
*Rohan Walters*

“The bio-toilet is one of those nuanced timeless technologies that will, sadly, sit on the shelf until the consciousness of Toronto shifts upward. Eventually, though, we will have no choice but to utilize more advanced methods because continuing to use status quo methods will be the more painful both environmentally and economically.

“The spirit of the bio-toilet, the science of the bio-toilet and the economics of the bio-toilet will be there when Toronto finally decides to reward better holistic solutions. That day, sadly, is not today.”

## The usefulness of mistakes

Post script to the bio-toilet: Chances are, the community-built bio-toilet would have been as successful and popular as the cob courtyard is. But it's also possible that the toilet might not have worked well at the beginning. A new technology in a new place needs a lot of tinkering. As well, after Recreation management changed the staffing system to be less flexible, it's very possible that the new staff would have just said no – to learning how to make



*From the installation manual*

a composting toilet work.

Even if there might have been some eager young environmentalists who wanted to put extra effort to trying out the new unit, the difficulties of being a pioneer might have turned out to be considerable.

And yet, if the bio-toilet gift had been accepted and it turned out to have problems, park friends – including the kids – would have had interesting mistakes to learn from. Citizen science! Georgie and Rohan were willing to engage with park friends and learn together, knowing that mistakes can be even more useful for discovery than successes. The big loss when the bio-toilet gift was rejected was that neighbourhood missed out on the chance to learn something useful first-hand and in detail. Maybe next time....

## The Yurt

In 2004, park friends Michelle Oser and Ian Small lent the park a huge yurt (traditional nomad tribal dwelling). They had bought it in Uzbekistan when they were working there for *Doctors Without Borders*. Jan Mackie, whose Spiral Garden program was the inspiration for our sandpit and adventure playground, and who used the yurt before us, made it work for us by showing the staff how to fit all the posts and circles and doors and felts together. For three years, the yurt was a backdrop for the Cooking Fire



Jan Mackie

Theatre Festival, a story space for summer, a peaceful meditation spot, a playroom, sometimes even a billet for adventure-some park visitors. The wooden frame needed a lot of people to hold it steady when it was being set up and when the roof



Theater performance in front of the yurt

struts were being put in. Anyone who wanted to experience the complications of being a nomadic sheep-herder (?) found this a very satisfying stand-in. Good food was provided, to keep the nomads' strength up.

The yurt generally stayed up for a bit over a week in each of those years. We thought we should get people to take turns sleeping in it so it wouldn't be vandalized. But if there was a chilly week, most nights nobody volunteered to sleep there. Mostly we



*The yurt could be locked at night*

of people -- kids, adults – went inside and sat on the grass or the carpet in there for a while. The mood was a bit reverential, but it didn't have to be.

The main problem about a real tribal yurt was that when it rained, the felt got wet and then it was VERY smelly.

By the third year, the yurt began to biodegrade – struts broke and the felt began to get moldy, and to get holes. The owners, Michelle and Ian, said they could see that a yurt was not meant for a damp climate. So the struts went to the sandpit for kids to build with, except for those struts that were cracked – those were cut up and used to fire the bread oven.

## Louisa

*Louisa Samuels is doing a double major in political science and sociology at the University of Toronto now, but she's been coming to Dufferin Grove Park, and keeping an eye out, since she was little.*

*From Louisa:* "We live in a house that backs right onto the park. So when I was a kid my mom started me off letting me

just kept the doors locked and nobody did any damage. One night we forgot to lock the doors and in the morning there were some new people sleeping there. In the daytime we mostly kept the doors open. Lots

come to the park with just my dog Toby. As time went on I could come by myself. It's like a second home to me, it's safe.

"I played in the sandpit a lot when I was little. My mom would drop me there, and when I was done, and covered with wet sand, she'd lift me up and bring me into our garden and hose me down in the backyard.

"We always had my birthday party here, on December 6. This is the most ideal place to have any sort of festivity – you have so many things to do, even during the winter. Campfires, skating, going on adventures at the farmers' market. And there's so much open space to play games, have picnics. A lot of the kids that came to my birthday parties didn't go to parks, maybe they didn't live near a park. So I showed them how good it is.

"I think of myself now that I'm older as a protector of the park. I walk my dog through here at night time and I make sure everything is okay. All I ever see is groups of people that are just chilling, nobody's too rambunctious. I see even more people now since the rink is used as a skateboard park in the summer. Kids are there, even late at night, and that also makes it safer.

"I learned how to ice skate here. Now when I'm skating here, kids come up to me and ask me to show them how to do the simple things like stopping and turning. I meet new people that way and I love it."

## Jason

*The rink pad at Dufferin Grove is used as an unofficial skateboard park in spring, summer, and fall. Skateboarder Jason Kun helps maintain it.*

*From Jason Kun:* A project like this isn't started from building a whole bunch of massive ramps. The Dundas-Bathurst skate park



*Louisa Samuels*





*Jason Kun with his son*

was moved over here in 2006, because its home rink pad was getting refurbished. Having the skateboard park here sparked a lot of people's imagination about what this space could be.

"After the equipment was moved back to its original location, some friends that I knew from Newfoundland took some old run-down benches they found here in the park and put a strip of metal on them. That was the start. Later the guys at Dundas-Bathurst started giving us some stuff they didn't need there. More pieces were slowly being added. Eventually this new skateboard place began to need some more structure, and they needed a point person, so that's when I started volunteering. I knew some of the guys from skateboarding at the Dundas park. But this was closer to where I lived and had more of a community feel."

"I got involved because someone's got to make a decision on stuff, you can't just be indecisive. Some people might not like the decision, but the decision's got to be made. And also if you start making decisions, you have to continue to make decisions. If you build something, you have to repair it, or decide to retire it... or else, if someone gets hurt on a piece of equipment that you decided to put there, that can have a ripple effect on the other skateboard parks."

"I don't feel like it's unfair that some of us end up doing most of the work on the skate park and most of the others just come to use what we built. A park is like a potluck. Everyone has to arrive, some people don't bring materials, but they help to make it a community. A park needs to



*The repair crew*

be used. Just like sometimes there's too much food at a potluck. It needs to get eaten. Everyone's got a part to play. The eaters are also an important thing.

"We had some conflict when the BMX bikers started coming. Things should organically evolve, but there need to be some rules made. In this park, there are a bunch of young kids, and it's a very accessible space, it's very inclusive. If bikers want to come and share it, that's okay – but they need to remember that this park was essentially started for and by skateboarders. They should respect that. And most of them do. Even so, when I stated that on a web forum, some people didn't like what I said. But – you can't have everybody love you. And also, conflict gets everybody discussing and arguing about what matters to them, and that's good."

## James and Andrea

People who are different can be very lonely. One kind of difference is carrying a diagnosis, for instance "homeless" or "refugee" or "disabled." But in fact, people who are different have made the park more lively, more interesting, and more friendly. Here is



*James hanging out at the skatepark*

an interview with James Brown, who was born with Down syndrome, and has been an important part of the park for years – his participation is a gift. James' mother Andrea Adams tells some of the story as well.

James: "I'm eighteen. I work at the park sometimes. With Matt [park staff] and other

friends of mine. I was making mini-pizzas and cookies. My dad taught me to cook. At the park I also made chocolate chip cookies. Sometimes when I was working I sat on a bench. I made hot dogs too, a whole bunch of them. I get hot dogs and put them in

the buns.”

Andrea: “..and sometimes you help out at the market. You would help the French fry guys, right?”

James: “yes. They’re my brothers.”

Andrea: “...and sometimes you help the fish guys that sell the coconut balls?”

James: “oh yeah. I serve fish on a bun.”

Andrea: “...and the French fry guys say you are kind of their ambassador, because you give people ideas of what dips they could use. Once you are on a roll, you are quite a salesman.”



*About the skateboard park, on the Dufferin Grove outdoor rink pad during the off-season:*

James: “When I go to the skateboard park I know people from talking to them, and from school. I come but I don’t mind not skateboarding. I still bring my light sabre sometimes. I sing songs using my iPod. I got a new one for my birthday.

I bring my girlfriend here. Her name is Tamara. I see her at Everyday Friends, right here [campfire]. She came here with me, on a date, too.”

Andrea: “James met Tamara through Everyday Friends. They go on dates sometimes. They plug in their iPods to the same music and then head down to the skateboarders. Everyday Friends has a campfire here at Dufferin Grove once a year, and Pal-13-19 also uses the campfire once a year.”

James: “In the winter I help out in the kitchen, and I come to skate at night-time.”

Andrea: “You used to ice skate a lot. Ted [park staff] taught James to skate. It was a really important thing for us. We signed him up for lessons when he was eight, and Ted took it really

seriously, and made sure James could skate. That gave James his first real independence.

James: “Yeah. When I come to the park now, I like to be a performer, sing into my mike. Like karaoke.”

Andrea: “You do that at home too, but you mostly do it here. You pick up your headphones and your mike and you head down to the park, and you sing there. Often when I come down at the end of the evening, you’re sitting at the picnic table with the skateboarders.”

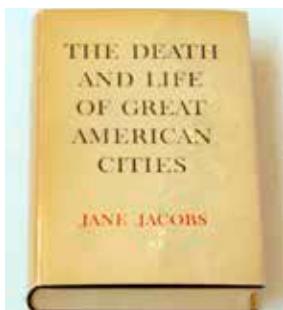


*Postscript from Jutta:* Once when the skateboarders were kibitzing with James, I asked them if they were making fun of him. They were indignant. “What do you mean? He’s our friend! We grew up together.” And when I told them that James had done an interview for this booklet, they said that was great. They had missed him at the park while he was at camp, they said, and they were really glad he was back again.

*James and his microphone*

## A warning from Jane Jacobs

Before Jane Jacobs died in 2006, a few of us used to meet at her house once a year, a week or two before the awarding of the yearly



*Jane Jacobs' first best-seller*

Jane Jacobs prizes. There was always a potluck supper in her dining-room/kitchen. Jane would sit at the head of the table and grin like the Cheshire cat, sometimes asking questions, and sometimes telling a story herself. The last year we met there, Jane, almost ninety, talked about her book tour (her book *Dark Days Ahead* had just come out). She had been to Portland Oregon, where she

knew a lot of people, and she expected a pretty enlightened audience. But during the discussion that followed her talk, Jane said, people kept talking about “visions,” grand stories about what

might happen in Portland in the future. Jane said she asked them, “why do you talk about this make-believe future?” They said, “we have to talk that way. In order to get money from foundations, we have to have a planning vision that sounds exciting to the funders.”

Jane said she told the vision seekers in Portland: “that’s no good. Stop talking about visions. Do what you see as right for now, and the future will turn out as good as it can.”

In the decade since Jane Jacobs died, many landscape planners and urban policy makers have tried to claim her as their own. But Jacobs early on denounced mainstream urban planning as “pseudo-science.” She constantly encouraged people to trust their common sense about what makes their own neighbourhoods work well – taking small steps to address what’s needed now instead of big plans for the longer term. We think that applies just as well to parks.



*Photo: Hercule Stryman*

*The dinner table group at the Jane Jacobs prize ceremony. Jane at the left*

## Nayssam

*Nayssam Shujauddin worked at Dufferin Grove and also at its sister rink, Wallace-Emerson until the corporate nature of city government reasserted itself and she was no longer able to use her talents.*

*From Nayssam:* “When I came over to Wallace Rink from working at Dufferin Rink, we were still on the old snack bar system because we didn’t have sinks at the time – we were cleaning the dishes with three buckets, or doing dishes in the wash-



*Nayssam Shujauddin*

room. We didn't get the kitchen put in until a year later. So we had an oven but no water. And yet I really enjoyed that first year. There were challenges, but I was able to run with things. The rink coordinators said, you're in charge. Just do what you need to do. So I said – okay, so this is how it works.

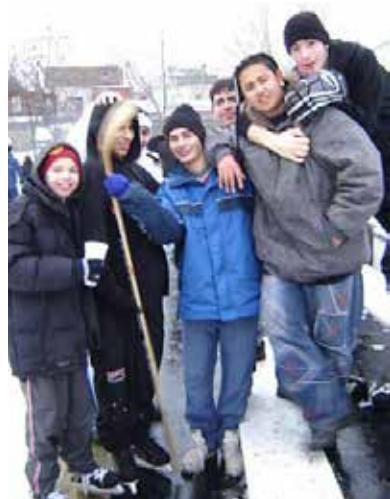


*Wallace rink got much busier*

for me to figure out how to be friendly but also pretty firm – ‘this is how it’s going to work,’ you know, ‘there are families around.’ It got to the point where, as soon as I started to walk onto the ice, all the guys would pitch their cigarettes through the fence or would put out their joints. They were all pretty respectful. But they were older. With the younger kids, they had a different idea. They thought they could do whatever they want and they didn’t have to listen.

“So that’s the challenge we had. We did a lot of just working with the kids and cutting deals with them, how their behaviours should be and how we were going to figure it out together. Some of the kids came from very unstable home backgrounds. They could be great when they wanted to be, but they were very excitable. On rain days or heavy snow days no one would show up at the rink

“That year, I don’t remember much awful stuff happening like what happened before and after. I don’t remember thefts of any size. I know there were a few drug-related things but they weren’t all that bad, it didn’t seem scary. It just took a bit of time



except for those kids, and they would run around and scream and chase each other. It was fine. They were getting all their energy out, and it was not a big deal. They'd ask if they could turn up the music and have a dance party and we'd say, sure, because no one's here to be bothered by it. There were the other times when lots of people came to skate. Then I'd have those kids all in the kitchen, get them making mini-pizzas and serving food and taking money in – not carrying the main money pouch, but we'd have a bowl with coins and they'd be making change. It gave them a sense of responsibility and they really liked that we would trust them in that way. From time to time, we caught a couple of them stealing. It was never a large amount of money but we would make an issue, we'd talk about how there needs to be trust here. We were friendly with them but also set boundaries. We put a lot of effort into the rink. I really liked it – but it was exhausting.

“Gradually there was a shift. There were people coming in to play shinny hockey from different parts of the city – as far as from Mississauga, because they had heard this rink was great. We hadn't anticipated how busy it would get, and there were some points where it did feel out of control. At the same time we were no longer able to just run things the way we wanted to. There was a central decision made downtown to stop having a coordinator that would go around to the three different rinks, help out wherever it was needed. The money handling started to change too, to get really complicated, making it harder for us to keep a check.

“But the more that our control started to be taken away, the less I was willing to try interesting things at Wallace Rink. By the last year I worked there, I was watching the clock, just glad to get out of there.”



*Wallace rink on a good day*

## The last dance

With the city's corporate approach back in charge, both the staff and park friends were hobbled from using their talents, and many of them began to lose their enthusiasm.

There were still moments of experimentation that were interesting. One of the last times Dufferin Grove seemed like a commons was when CELOS got an offer, out of the blue, to use some funds from the GH Wood Foundation. John Broley, the director, called to say that the foundation was winding down its affairs, and that their board was interested in giving us some leftover funds. Were there things we'd like to do?

There were. Enough activity was still happening around the bake ovens that it would be good to have a sitting area nearby. We had seen a very usable arrangement at a high school rooftop garden run by FoodShare. Their sitting area was called "Dan's Table," after our friend and park cook Dan DeMatteis.

The Parks staff had long since stopped collaborating with park friends or even with the recreation program staff, so making a proposal seemed unlikely to get anywhere. But there was another way – we could just build a second "Dan's Table" sitting area by the bake oven and



*Sitting area almost done*

see for ourselves if it worked. It was a gamble to do it without permission, but getting permission or even a response could take years, and a commons doesn't work like that. The money was suddenly there and a builder we trusted had the time just then to build the tables, benches and planters we wanted. If the city made us remove the sitting area, we could always find another place for it. So we took the gamble.

## Mike

*We sent the plans to the GH Wood Foundation and they gave us the \$21,000 to build the “Dan’s Table” sitting area. Our friend Mike Conway was willing to build it.*

*From Mike:* “I figured out some variations on an idea that James Davis had used for the “Dan’s Table” sitting area for Food-Share. They put their tables away at the end of the fall, but we needed something more robust for staying out in the park year-round. I got very solid stuff to work with – high-grade cedar, carriage bolts – that was fun. When you build anything, the formula says to expect at least 10 per cent wastage, but we had much less than that – we used almost every bit of that good cedar.



“A friend let me use his shop. That worked out really well. I was working in his shop during the day while he was out working elsewhere. He was pleased to be part of it. He likes the park, he liked the idea of what we were doing. At the end I made him a table for his back yard, using some of the leftover wood plus

I bought some more. He got a table that he needed in his garden and I got to use his shop – a very fair trade.

“The tables were put together at the shop but the trellises were brought over just as lengths of lumber and assembled at the park. When we brought it all



*Mike Conway gets helps building the planter boxes*

over to the park, I was worried that someone would come and say, you’re not allowed to put that there. But nobody did. When we were putting it up, though, I heard that a few people thought it was going to be sort of a private area, they didn’t realize that it wasn’t a fence. But it soon it became obvious that the planters and the trellises were just a way of defining the space.

“The ground wasn’t quite level so we had to build up the height under one of the corners, with some soil and some sod. It worked well – it hasn’t eroded. And then we saw that if we put



*The first triangle table*

the tables on the diagonal we could fit in a few more tables, so I went and made two more. The part I enjoyed the most was making the triangle tables, working out the lengths, because if you get the angles right, you don’t waste any board. It was really fun to use the least amount of wood to make

a strong table – so satisfying to get it right. And then what gave it personality was the flowers in the planters – the way they grow around the trellises. I cut holes in the table tops for the umbrellas that we bought at the last minute, to give some sun protection – and those umbrellas defined the space as well.

“After we put it up the area looked so nice that I thought, well maybe a lot of this will be stolen. So we chained the tables, but the chains could have been easily cut. And yet by now there is almost no graffiti on the tables and none of them have been stolen. It was surprising how bright the wood looked at the beginning – it stood out so much. But actually the cedar turned gray quite fast and then the whole area just blended in very nicely. It just became a part of the park.”



*Adding the umbrellas*

The day after the sitting area was finished, it was full of people. It's used by all sorts of people and groups – not only for Friday Night Supper and three-times-weekly school pizza-making outings, but for planning meetings of nearby organizations, and kindergarten graduation ceremonies, and a Wal-mart staff picnic, and youth "marijuana clubs," and Thursday farmers' market

customers eating their snacks, and writers working on their novels, and on and on. Removal by Parks staff would not have been a good idea.

Two weeks after "Dan's Table" was in place, I invited the Parks supervisor to come and have a look. He was not altogether pleased. He



*The most popular place to sit*

asked, "is it wheelchair accessible?"

"Totally."

"What kind of wood?"

"Long-lasting cedar."

Pause.

"You should have consulted with us before you put this in."

I said, "we didn't have ten years for meetings."

"It wouldn't have taken ten years."

"You're right, it would have taken longer" – but I said it with a grin. The Parks supervisor and I have known each other for twenty years, from the time when he was a (very good) zamboni operator at Rosedale Rink.

He sighed. "Well, don't do it again."

He has no need to worry. The park is no longer a commons, so this was my swan song. But maybe, sometime when the tide turns, new park friends will find some of the fun again.

