



## Dingeman Park to become a Field of Dreams

*The Skillman Foundation's Good Neighborhoods program is a 10-year \$100-million program that provides full-scale support to six Detroit neighborhoods where 65,000 children live.*

It's a challenge – a gauntlet thrown down to Southwest Detroit – we'll give you \$200,000 if you raise the additional \$200,000 needed to build a professional football field in Dingeman Park. And the challenger is the NFL.

"This is the third football field that the National Football League (NFL) Grassroots Program has established for kids in Detroit through a funding challenge to Think Detroit PAL," says Dan Varner, chief executive officer of Think Detroit PAL. "It shows their confidence in us to meet the challenge."

Dingeman Park, located in Southwest Detroit adjacent to Chadsey High School, will get a new football field surface if the matching challenge is met, with ground broken on the new field by spring of 2009. The grant, awarded by the Detroit Lions, the NFL Youth Football Fund, and the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), will provide a professional quality playing surface for use by the Chadsey High School Explorers (who have not been able to host a home game in 18 years) and the Southwest Detroit Warriors, a team with the Youth Football Program, which is administered by Think Detroit PAL with support from the Detroit Lions – one of the largest youth football leagues in the country.

Although initial plans do not call for extra niceties such as bleachers, lights, or fencing, the football field itself will be as high-quality a field as any in the city.

"We believe this park, when it reaches its potential, will draw even more neighborhood kids into sports," says Fred Hunter, community relations director for Think Detroit PAL. "Sports are a way of making a neighborhood cohesive," he says. "One of the bi-products of youth sports is the neighborhood solidarity that results. Who comes to watch the games? Parents, grandparents, siblings, neighbors, friends – each game becomes a social occasion."

Varner agrees: "A sure sign of a neighborhood that works is seeing kids in brightly-colored uniforms playing ball, whether it's football, baseball or soccer," he says. "The 'accidental benefit' of our work is that we build social capital. The parents gathered at the games talk about the schools, the needs of the neighbor-

hood, and this often results in action. It's a powerful side benefit."

But the main benefits are for the kids. Youth sports have been described as a medium for adult mentoring within the context of challenging situations. In this context, sports can be used by caring adults to help young people continuously strengthen the four early building blocks of character: empathy, fairness, self-control and self-awareness.

"We see this happening every day," says Varner. "We train our coaches carefully so that life skills, not just sports skills, are being imparted to kids whenever they play or practice."

Every team has its fans and cheerleaders, and Dingeman Park's greatest fan and cheerleader is Sheila Crowell, without whom the football field would possibly have remained in the field of dreams. Two years ago, Crowell worked with Bridging Communities to obtain a Community Connections grant – a small grant up to \$5,000 that can be initiated by residents if they see an unmet need for children in their neighborhood -- from the Skillman Foundation, which enabled them to contract with the University of Detroit Mercy's Detroit Collaborative Design Center to develop a conceptual master plan for the park. The football field is the first portion of this extensive plan – which includes soccer, softball and baseball fields, as well as tennis and basketball courts and a track – to approach fruition.

Similar to Classie Parker, who started Five Star Garden in Central Harlem on a vacant lot, Sheila Crowell has been a major force in reviving 15-acre Dingeman Park, which sits across the street from her house, so that it will once again become a source of life in the neighborhood. But instead of growing vegetables, this park will grow strong children.

In both cases, it's about the power of the land to nurture stronger communities.

### Good Neighborhoods Locations



*The Dingeman Park conceptual master plan was designed through a workshop process by community stakeholders and the Detroit Collaborative Design Center at the University of Detroit Mercy. The design envisions Dingeman Park as a recreation space shared by neighborhood residents and students of Munger Elementary School and Chadsey High School. The proposal includes athletic fields organized through strips of landscape, which are connected by a series of meandering walking paths."*

According to Crowell, Dingeman Park can be an important factor in community engagement, drawing people out of their homes and into a safe common ground to meet and get to know their neighbors – a first step in community revitalization. "We can create a safer neighborhood through this park," Crowell says. "A park that is constantly busy and used by all generations becomes the hub of a healthy neighborhood."

Plans for the park include pavilions at each end to accommodate picnics and other activities. A walking path throughout the park will be designed for use by everyone from kids to seniors – anyone who wants to have a safe place to exercise outdoors. Community gardens are also in the plans, as well as concession stands, comfort stations and a playscape area for young kids.

"This park is surrounded by five schools," Crowell says. "It should be swarming with children. We just need to make it inviting and safe for them." The new school crossing signs around the park are only the first in the safety measures Crowell wants to see. Others include school crossing guards, safety lights, three-way stop signs, traffic lights and new sidewalks.

The "inviting" part of the equation has taken its first big step with the football field challenge. "Build a professional quality football field, and the kids will come," Crowell says. "Same with soccer, basketball, baseball, softball, tennis. Most kids want to play games with other kids. Right now they have, essentially, a 15-acre vacant lot. They need more than that. They need to know that they are important enough to have high-quality playfields."

*By Edith Assaff*

*Edith Assaff is a Berkley-based writer who has chronicled the Good Neighborhoods program since its inception.*



*Dingeman Park's greatest cheerleader, Sheila Crowell*



*Southwest Warriors hard at practice at Dingeman Park*

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### Catch Clemente movie at Clark Park

Join CLAVE (Community of Latino Artists, Visionaries and Educators) and the Clark Park Coalition for the movie Roberto Clemente and a discussion of Clemente's contributions to the game of baseball and the Latino community.

**Thursday, June 26 @ 5 p.m.**  
**Clark Park Recreation Center,**  
**1130 Clark Street, Detroit 48209**

Learn more about the Skillman Foundation and its Good Neighborhoods program at [www.skillman.org](http://www.skillman.org)

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