

PROVIDENCE Journal

Cliff Wood: Good things happening in Kennedy Plaza

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By Cliff Wood

Kennedy Plaza has received a lot of attention lately — most of it focused on disturbances, panhandling and bad behavior — but something in Amanda Milkovits' Sept. 2 news story ("Taking back Kennedy Plaza: Increased police patrols described as first step") caught my eye:

"One hot day this summer a mother and 7-year-old son sat in the shade in Burnside Park after a children's program at the Imagination Center. ... The woman admitted that they'd been homeless for a few months. ... She said she keeps her son busy with free events. She doesn't want him to know what their real situation is."

This encapsulates so much of what gets lost in conversations that only focus on the "chaos in Kennedy Plaza." Public spaces are integral to the health and vitality of our city, and keeping them clean and safe is essential for all of its citizens.

I am one of the people responsible for that task. I am the Executive Director of the Downtown Providence Parks Conservancy (DPPC), a public-private partnership dedicated to creating a world-class parks system in our city's historic urban core.

There are many groups like ours around the country — the Bryant Park Corporation in New York City, the Emerald Necklace Conservancy in Boston and, the granddaddy of them all, the Central Park Conservancy — that steward public parks using the principles of place-making. According to the Project for

Public Spaces, one of the pioneers of this movement, place-making is “centered around observing, listening to, and asking questions of the people who live, work, and play in a particular space in order to understand their needs and aspirations for that space and for their community as a whole.”

That’s what the DPPC is doing right here in Kennedy Plaza and Burnside Park. Though recent events demonstrate that we still have a way to go in accomplishing our mission, we are proud of the progress that has been made.

We work with partners like the mayor’s office; the Department of Art, Culture and Tourism; the Providence police, the Downtown Improvement District and the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority on many things, from routine maintenance and security to big events like the FirstWorksFestival on the Plaza, in 2012, and PVDfest. We also converted a former parking lot at the southwest edge of the plaza into a beautiful new green space, Biltmore Park, where a café will open later this fall. And we coordinate with social service organizations such as Crossroads to ensure that people who arrive at the park in need of help get it.

Perhaps our most immediate and important work is the diverse schedule of free public programming we produce every summer and fall, including the Burnside Park Music Series & Beer Garden, the Downtown Farmer’s Market, KidoInfo Storytime and Play in the Park, and the upcoming Afrika Nyaga Drum & Dance Festival (Oct. 1) and Spooky Storytime (Oct. 29).

These events draw thousands of visitors into the park every year from every neighborhood and encompass all of the diversity that makes Providence such a vibrant city. The children’s programming is particularly crucial, as it creates a safe space and provides free recreation to families who need it most — like the ones in Ms. Milkovits’ story.

One of the most important principles of place-making, and one of our core beliefs at the DPPC, is that the best way to transform a space is by transforming the way people use it. If you believe, like we do, that it’s of vital importance to maintain our public parks as safe spaces for children and recreational spaces for all, then we encourage you to do the simplest thing you can to help us improve Kennedy Plaza: come and visit. See what’s going on. Experience our programming.

Law enforcement plays an important role in keeping our parks safe, but ultimately the best way to keep a public space free of negative activity is to fill it with positive activity. Let's create safe public spaces for all to enjoy and ones that will make us proud to be Rhode Islanders.

Cliff Wood is the executive director of the Downtown Providence Parks Conservancy.