

The History of Janesville's Peace Park

By Peace Park Coordinator Mike Morris and Former City Parks Director Tom Presny
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The Peace Park Committee

Peace Park is located on Janesville Wisconsin's west side, inside the main entrance to Rockport Park at 2801 Rockport Road. Efforts for it began in 1999 when a citizens committee came together to make plans for a community built playground at Rockport Park.

To illustrate how the playground committee intended to involve the community, Mike Morris shared during a presentation before the Janesville City Council, while seeking approval of committee plans for Peace Park -

"A small pebble was cast into a large body of water, from which small rings will grow large... demonstrating that if we all care for each other just a little bit more, what positive energy we collectively can have for our children, families and community".

The core of Peace Park committee consisted of 16 dedicated and tireless members who focused on community awareness, schools and youth involvement, local and professional design, fund raising, volunteers, construction, and ongoing support.

Park committee members learned that the Peace Park area was the site of a May 1992 racially motivated rally where a 20' wood cross, covered in burlap, and soaked with kerosene, was planted and the plan was to burn it in an expression of hatred, but its burning never materialized. Morris said, just knowing that, made us all work harder to work towards the completion of Peace Park. This action also prompted the later placement of a 51' tall Peace Pole at Peace Park.

The Peace Paintings

The Peace Paintings were created by Janesville artist Gary Gandy. This series of Native American paintings can be found displayed inside the Peace Park Playground teepee. The eight paintings represent compass directions (North, Northeast, East, Southeast, etc.), important to Native American culture.

The paintings were spawned from multiple inspirations. First by the White Buffalo Calf Women prophecy, proclaiming peace and prosperity upon her return. This prophecy shares that each race has a given task. The world will attain peace if all races come and work together.

Further inspiration was gained by the nationally reported and celebrated birth in 1994 of Miracle the White Buffalo in Janesville. Native American's prophesized this birth would begin the coming of world peace, good fortune, and reconciliation of divided humanity. Following this birth Morris as the parks committee coordinator, commissioned Gary Gandy to paint the eight world class teepee shaped peace paintings of Native Americans from across America.

The paintings are Gandy's interpretation of what it would look like if all of the world's people came together in peace. The word PEACE is hidden in each painting. Working at it – we all can find Peace in the Peace Paintings. The paintings and the importance of what they depict, sparked discussions about creating a park centered around peace and unity.

Peace Park Playground

Between 1999 and 2002 committee members spent thousands of hours building community awareness, recruiting over 1500 volunteers, raising \$170,000 in cash

donations and over triple that amount in material donations and labor. Phase one of Peace Park Playground for children ages 2-6 was built May 16-21, 2000. Phase two and the main play area and teepee was built May 13-19 2002.

In recognition of Peace Park Committee's many efforts, the Janesville City Council adopted Resolution # 2002-265 on June 24, 2002, which renamed 6.2 acres of Rockport Park to Peace Park.

On the one year anniversary of 9/11 terrorist attacks, Peace Park officially opened following a heavily attended public dedication ceremony on September 11, 2002.

At the dedication of the project, Morris representing the park committee, was quoted as saying "It took us a while to complete the playground and Peace Park, but all along the way, people and things kept falling into place, as if the project was meant to be.

He continued, "Our goal for Peace Park always was and still is to promote peace and unity in the community by giving our children the chance to learn about cultural diversity as they play". It is our belief that if children play together now, they work together later.

Local tribal representative Billy Bob Grahn was instrumental at Peace Park in gaining both awareness for Native American causes and considerable tribal participation at Peace Park. Historically significant at the dedication of Peace Park, was the Bad River tribe's presentation of their Nation's flag to the park. This event marked only the third time in the tribe's history that it has extended this honor. The Native American Drum, Seven Springs All Nations, played several songs to cleanse and dedicate the area at the time of the opening.

To enhance the community's efforts and investment in Peace Park, the City of Janesville built the adjoining complex that

includes a pavilion with restrooms and an important linkage to Janesville's 35 mile bike path, via the Peace Trail, which now connects Beloit with Janesville on the west side of the Rock River. In this way, the committee hopes the message of peace, spreads, county-wide, regionally and beyond.

The Peace Pole and Plaza

A 51 foot tall Peace pole, the world's tallest at the time of dedication, was dedicated at Peace Park in Janesville on May 28, 2005. Its design and construction was that of a construction committee lead by Mike Morris. The message 'May Peace Prevail on Earth' is inscribed on all four sides of the pole, each in a different color – red, yellow, black, and white, representative of all the races. Nearly 100 people gathered while children from local schools read original poems about peace and everyone took part in a World Peace Flag Ceremony.

The concept of peace poles was started by the United Nations as a symbol of commonality though out the world. More the 200,000 peace poles have been erected in 180 nations.

The establishment of the Peace Pole and surrounding plaza anchors Peace Park and stands a beacon of Peace, for all to see. The pole is surrounded with benches and rubber surfacing in the shape of the globe, and bronze plaques promoting the United Nations Educational, scientific, and cultural six key values of peace: respect all life, reject violence, share with others, listen to understand, preserve the planet, and rediscover solidarity. Attached to the pole are more than 39 plaques with the word 'peace' in different languages.