

SPARK PARKS Spark the Imagination

By Kathleen Ownby



Travis Elementary is home to the Trivisauros created by local artist Paul Kittelson. Part of Houston ISD, the school has a Magnet/Vanguard Program and is located two miles north of downtown in the historic Woodland Heights neighborhood. Photo courtesy of Tom Callins Photography.

Although Houston may be known for its many cultural and art museums, the handiwork of local artists can also be found in a not-so-usual location – school and neighborhood SPARK Parks, which grew from one woman’s inspiration.

In 1979, Eleanor Tinsley beat a twenty-year incumbent and became the first woman elected to Houston City Council as an at-large member. During her tenure, she pioneered dozens of landmark ordinances and projects including: the Houston International Initiatives, the Houston READ Commission, the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission, the 9-1-1 Emergency Network, the ordinance requiring children under eighteen to wear bicycle helmets, the smoking restriction ordinance, the W-A-T-E-R Fund, which helps pay water and sewer bills for the city’s elderly and impoverished, and the adoption of Houston’s sign ordinance.

Tinsley developed and implemented the SPARK School Park Program. In 1983, Houston needed 5,000 acres of parkland to compare favorably to other cities. The mayor and county judge commissioned a Green Ribbon Study to investigate how to increase Houston-Harris County’s park space. Council Member Tinsley gave the report to a summer intern who highlighted the suggestion to “make use of public school grounds.” The rest is history.



Four generations of the Tinsley family have enjoyed SPARK Parks, shown left to right: Lucy Elliott, Emily Ownby Elliott, who worked with SPARK from 2005 to 2006, SPARK founder Eleanor Tinsley, and SPARK’s executive director, Kathleen Tinsley Ownby.

Photo courtesy of Tom Callins Photography.

Council Member Tinsley had previously served as a trustee for the Houston Independent School District and knew the people who could make this idea happen. She served as the fourth woman president in 1972. She chaired the campaign committee that led to voter approval of the Houston Community College System. Most importantly, she grew up in a home where her father expressed his belief that churches should be used during the week and schools should be used on the weekend.

An inter-local agreement stipulated that the school district would maintain the property and improvements; the parks, however, would remain accessible to the community after school and on weekends. This represented a change in philosophy for many principals. In 1983, not all schools were open and welcoming to the community. The plan offered a way for schools and community members to develop an important relationship. SPARK is also unique as a financial joint venture between the private sector, school districts, and city, county, and federal governments.

As a result of this agreement, SPARK was formed in 1983 to create more green space and critically needed recreational areas by transforming public school grounds into neighborhood parks. Creating more park space is essential in a city where there are not enough parks to meet the growing population's needs.

In 1988, I moved back to Houston with my family having been in the Dallas and Tulsa areas for fifteen years. On my many trips home during that time, I knew that in order to "be with Mother, you went with Mother." My mother was Eleanor Tinsley, and I had accompanied her to several SPARK events. I decided to volunteer in her Council office as a way to get acclimated to life back in Houston. Very soon the assistant SPARK director decided to go back to teaching at the community college. The job was open, and Mother offered it to me. A part-time position was a perfect fit. I had a daughter in middle school, we were building a house, and I had spent lots of time serving on PTA and Garden Club activities. I jumped at the chance. After about a year, the founding director of SPARK, Goldie Waghalter, decided to focus entirely on Houston International

Initiatives, and I became the executive director.

One of the things I like best about my job of twenty-four years is the mix of people I work with, whether it is the school principal, the architect, the artist, the PTA/PTO volunteer, or the contractor. We try to finish a park between twelve and eighteen months, and seeing a project through from beginning to end is very rewarding. I also like knowing what is going on all over Houston, not just in my neighborhood.

SPARK arranges for professional architects to work with each school committee to develop a park design that best meets the needs of the school and neighborhood. The children of each school take part in the design and upkeep of their SPARK Park. Community involvement is a cornerstone of the SPARK program; officials believe that the children and community should feel a sense of ownership for the park.



Artists from Artist Boat portrayed Garfield Elementary's mascot, the Gators, on the entrance to this SPARK Park in Pasadena ISD. The theme of the entry gate is "Life on the Bayou."

Photo courtesy of Artist Boat.

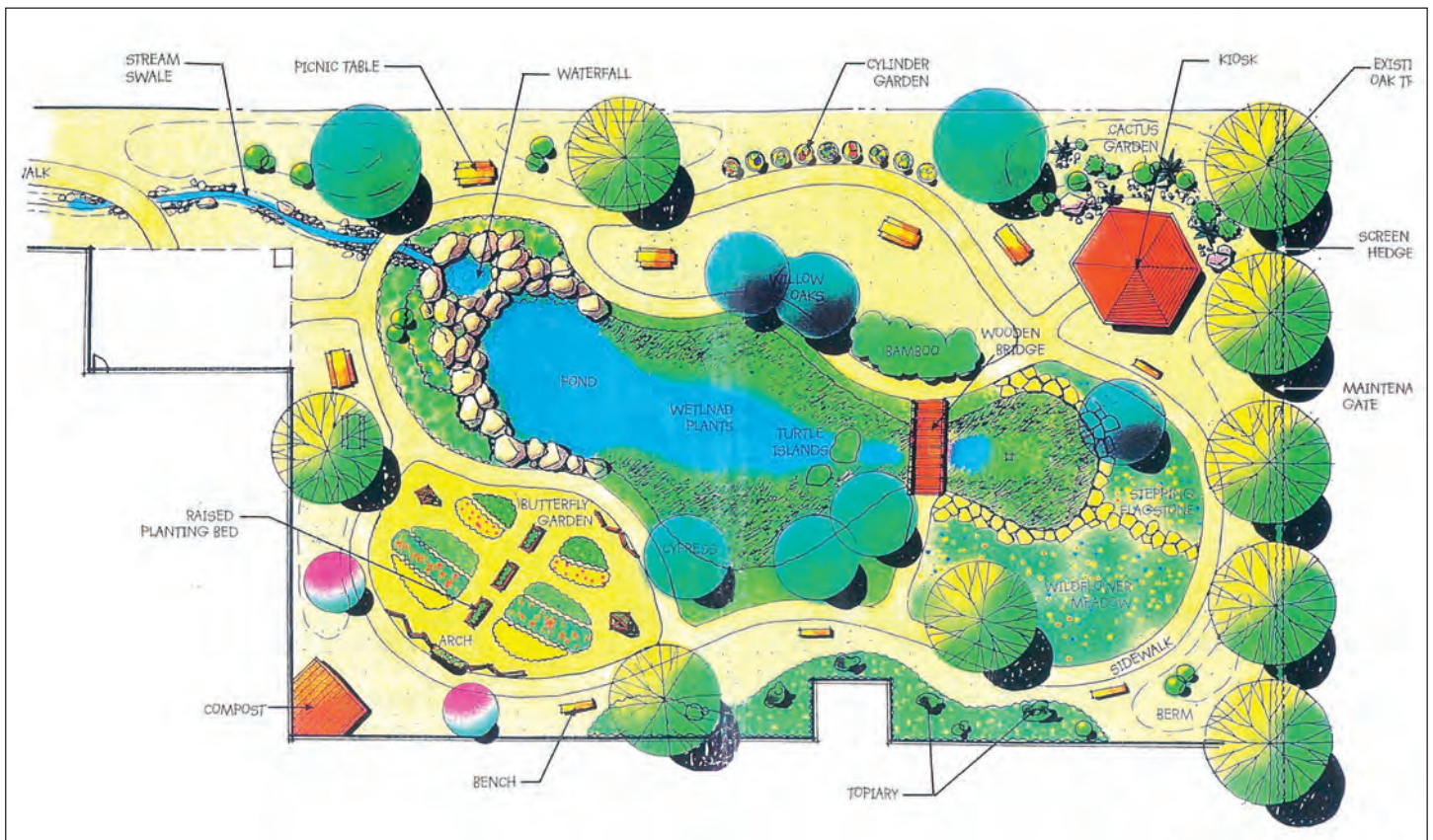
▼ Photo courtesy of Tom Callins Photography.





Spring Branch ISD's Meadow Wood Elementary park dedicated in December 2007 has the theme "United We Stand." Artist Rose Toro worked with students painting tiles. The plaza around the outdoor classroom features a chess /checker board and a hopscotch board featuring the flags of the thirteen original states.

Photo courtesy of Tom Collins Photography.



The SPARK Park dedication for Tinsley Elementary in Houston ISD was held in April 2004. What was originally a detention basin is now an environmental classroom complete with butterfly and cactus gardens, native plants, and a wetlands area with a solar-powered water pump.

Photo courtesy of SPARK School Park Program.



The November 2011 dedication of Cornelius Elementary in Houston ISD represented a Re-SPARK of the original project. Linda Hinojos of Airbrush Specialties designed the chessboard. The school has an award-winning chess team and is a Magnet school for science, math, and technology.

Photo courtesy of SPARK School Park Program.

Community members can get involved in the project in many ways. Every school has a goal of raising \$5,000. Residents can contribute to projects aimed at achieving that goal. Students collect pennies, aluminum cans and newspapers, and sell candy, wrapping paper, and pickles. Community members can attend PTA and PTO events, such as silent auctions, carnivals, field days, golf tournaments, and spaghetti dinners. And they are even free to volunteer throughout the process, using their unique gifts to contribute to a park they will be proud to have. These efforts result in an empowered community very interested in the school their children attend.

While SPARK's main objective is to increase park space, the parks also help build a healthier community. Did you know that Houston is currently one of the "fattest" cities in America? Many students are more excited about watching TV or playing video games than exercising or playing outside, creating a health crisis in many underserved populations. For example, diabetes is a disease that is currently running rampant in low-income communities. On top of that, many parents fear sending their children to the neighborhood park because of safety issues, especially in neighborhoods that have gangs. SPARK Parks provide a safe place for students and their families to exercise and play outside in a location near their homes.

About half of the 180 SPARK Parks around the Houston area contain a public art component. Local artists, parents, and/or art teachers help with this piece of the park devel-

opment. Although world-renowned art museums abound in Houston, many children do not have the means to visit them. The parks' public art components expose young people to a variety of artistic opportunities. The art ranges from decorative tile archways to colorful ceramics and intricate mosaic designs.

SPARK Art enables local Houston artists to display their work in a public setting. Many schools have no art teacher to coordinate the art component of the park, so SPARK enlists a local artist. SPARK makes every attempt to match the ethnicity of the artist with that of the student body. Creation of this artwork provides an educational experience for the students as well as beautification for the neighborhood.

The sculptures at Travis Elementary School "Dinosaur" Park started with the imagination of Travis students in kindergarten through fifth grade when SPARK asked them to design their "ultimate playground." A huge dinosaur skeleton is the centerpiece of the park's play environment. Local sculptor Paul Kittelson created the innovative design of the huge dinosaur skeleton and faux archeological dig using student artwork.

Harlem Elementary School's SPARK Park was a project created in conjunction with the Museum of Cultural Arts, Houston. Artistic elements include a park entranceway sculpture designed by public artist and executive director of MOCAH, Reginald Adams. The concrete and tile mosaic sculpture depicts four children standing atop books while



Local artist Carter Ernst created over-sized books made with student tiles for Garden Oaks Elementary in Houston ISD. The Montessori Magnet school's curriculum focuses on the environment and science.

Photo courtesy of Tom Callins Photography.

holding books over their heads. The sculpture supports a sign displaying the name of the school and park in brightly colored tile mosaics.

Although every art project is different, each artist typically holds workshops where they work with the students on designing the art. Students benefit from this hands-on experience as they learn about different art mediums and the artistic process.

Some of the SPARK Parks also include an environmental component. Tinsley Elementary School, named for SPARK's founder, had a vision to develop a detention pond required for drainage control into a schoolyard nature center. The Tinsley Elementary SPARK Park and Nature Center now serves as a haven and sanctuary for native plants and birds, insects, butterflies, and turtles. The students, staff, and community now have a beautiful place to play, observe, and learn on land that once acted only as an open space for drainage.

One criteria for participating in the SPARK program requires that the park plans include pedestrian access for community use after school and on weekends. This allows all members of the community to enjoy the art and the recreational facilities of the park, giving them a central neighborhood location to gather with their

McWhirter Elementary in Clear Creek ISD received the first SPARK Park in the city of Webster, which was dedicated in November 2011. The school chose a space theme with red, white, and blue colors to reflect its mascot, an astronaut.

Photo courtesy of SPARK School Park Program.

families. A typical park consists of modular playground equipment, benches, picnic tables, a walking/jogging trail, trees, and outdoor classroom, as well as the public art component.

The successful SPARK Park model, unique to Houston in 1983, will be featured in an upcoming book telling the story of school playgrounds and how they have evolved in major cities. The organization has willingly shared this model with other school districts and would like to help the program expand into other communities. A SPARK Park was built at Banks Elementary in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in 2002 in conjunction with Baton Rouge Parks and Recreation. SPARK is currently working on an agreement with San Antonio Sports to develop parks at schools in that

city. A long-term goal includes seeing SPARK grow or be replicated in other parts of the state and country.

So next time you are passing through Houston, take a detour with the kids to a SPARK Park. Besides providing a fun place for neighborhood families to gather, SPARK Parks increase the physical beauty of Houston and pay tribute to the rich cultural heritages that are found in the city.

Kathleen Ownby has been director of SPARK for twenty-five years. She is a graduate of Leadership Houston Class XI and was recently named one of Houston's 50 Most Influential Women by *Houston Woman's Magazine*. Kathleen's favorite activities involve her two grandchildren – Lucy, six, and Byron, three.

