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New London's Riverside Park enjoys revival

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Visitors take in nature, paintings during Down by the Riverside fest

New London — Like their parents and grandparents before them, the city's children will be able to pass on stories of good times at Riverside Park.

One day, they might tell their own kids about Saturday's Down by the Riverside Festival, when they waited in line near the fancy new playscape to get an amazing twisted balloon sculpture and saw a beautiful woman in white, a "living statue" who didn't seem real until she smiled.

"I used to frequent this park with my father's family, and I'm grateful I can bring my children," said LaRee Johnson, a New London native who returned to the city recently after living out of state for the past five years.

My husband grew up here, and this was his snow-sledding hill," said Claudia Kenyon, an artist who set up along the park roadway with her watercolors.

Saved from being sold to the Coast Guard in 2011 and from falling into further neglect, the 18-acre swath of land on the city's east side has undergone a revival in recent years. Members of a political action committee who worked against the sale of the park and formed the nonprofit Riverside Park Conservancy are thrilled. An estimated 400 people attended the festival on Saturday.

"It's great to see all the people here," said 40-year-old Jeff Howard, a conservancy board member who went to the park with his mother as a child. "You come here daily and there's almost always someone on the playground or in the park."

Johnson, who brought her daughter and son, Alonda Dixon, 21, Jayden Julius, 5, to the festival, didn't know until Saturday that in November 2013, a pink and blue playscape had been erected amid the pines in honor of 6-year-old Emilie Parker, a Sandy Hook shooting victim who loved the shade.

"I think more people should come down to honor her and honor nature and what it represents," Johnson said.

Artists, crafters, musicians and a multicultural mix of residents turned out for the event. The Winthrop School's fourth-grade chorus performed in the morning and the New London High School Marching Band unveiled new music and some of their so-called stand tunes — including "Go Whalers Go!" — in the afternoon.

The park supporters organized the first Down By the Riverside Festival in 2011, not knowing if it would be the last, since the city had proposed selling a large chunk of the park to the Coast Guard. Voters narrowly defeated the sale in a referendum, and each year since then, the annual festival has continued to grow.

"The park was kind of defunct and they've kind of revived it," said Artelia Green Williams, a

lifelong city resident. “When I grew up, people used to come and sleep on the picnic tables to reserve a spot for the Fourth of July.”

Public and private funds are being used to renovate the park. The bathrooms have been rebuilt so that kids from the adjacent Winthrop School can spend time studying here, and the city recently approved funding to restore the stairs that link the school to the park.

Joan Sullivan-Cooper, a member of the conservancy board and festival organizer, said she loves to hear visitors say the park, with its hills, vistas, rock outcroppings and trees, is like no other in the city.

“You can do great things with this park,” Sullivan-Cooper said.

Conservancy board treasurer Ronna Stuller, returning from a nature walk led by Glen Dreyer from the Connecticut College Arboretum, said years of neglect actually helped Riverside retain an unusually high percentage of native plants because the soil was undisturbed. She listed wood asters, blue stem grass, white oak, sugar maples and low-bush blueberry and huckleberry as some of its natural assets.

Residents operate a community garden adjacent to the park entrance, and students from the Drop-In Learning Center planted a butterfly garden near the entrance.

“Just about a week ago I was there and, on a very small butterfly weed, there was a monarch (butterfly) larvae,” Stuller said.

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