

Activist hopes garden will inspire youth

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When Jim Embry said he wanted to get young people involved in designing a memorial garden, a reporter asked if that was odd.

"Yes, it's odd," he said. "But it ought to be normal."

Embry, a local artist and activist, recalled this story at weekend community meetings to organize the Isaac Murphy Memorial Garden. It's a project he hopes will change the way Lexington youth learn about community leadership by providing them with hands-on community projects.

"Kids walk past empty lots on their way to school and see that school work has no connection with their community," he said.

The park will honor contributions of blacks and residents of northeast Lexington to the thoroughbred industry. Embry hopes the park will be ready for the 2010 World Equestrian Games.

The half-acre park will be in the same neighborhood that Kentucky Derby-winning jockey Isaac Murphey once lived - the area bordering Midland Place and Nelson Avenue.

"It's recognition that the horse industry is based on a larger foundation," he said. "We are paying homage to our ancestors and looking toward the future."

Embry, a 1974 UK graduate, said he has been a Lexington activist since he was 10 when he joined his mother during civil rights demonstrations. As a member of the NorthEast Lexington Initiative, a community enhancement group, he has been working on developing the park for years.

Another part of Embry's wish to involve Lexington youth in community projects is the Youth Green Corps.

Embry created the group, along with members of the NorthEast Lexington Initiative, as a way for young people to become involved in the park project and build a sustainability-oriented community through other projects.

The NorthEast Lexington Initiative has been involved in youth projects for years, and Embry sees Youth Green Corps as a way for young people "to adopt and get inspired by their community."

A project like the park needs a wide range of people working on it to reflect the diversity in the world, Embry said.

"That is how the earth is," he said. "It's very diverse and it's very inclusive. It's very beautiful."

"With diversity we have the opportunity for our work to become even more grand, more sustainable," he said.

The community is responding, with meetings drawing interest from elementary school students to UK professors.

"We must have a table that is reflective of the community," Embry said. "We are trying to affect even greater democracy."

Still, Embry said the inclusiveness of the group was "weak" compared to what it could be.

At Saturday's Youth Green Corps meeting, Embry shared an early rendering of the park.

Leadership Lexington, another community enhancement group for young professionals, designed the rendering, which includes racetrack- and horseshoe-shaped walkways where a stage and gazebo could sit. Hills around the park are designed to protect children from traffic.

Youth Green Corps built on these ideas Saturday, suggesting the additions of a playground with a water feature, a statue in the middle of a mock-race track, using boulders as natural boundaries and adding an ice rink in the winter.

UK Greenthumb member Andy Stith said he wanted UK to become more involved in the project. He also liked many of the ideas community members had for the park.

"I like the idea of something that is vibrant and accessible to kids," he said.

Work on the park will begin in the spring. Embry said youth involvement in groups like Youth Green Corps should grow by that time. Right now, though, it's just too cold to work outside, he said.

"We're not a sustainable community if we're not involving young people in these activities," Embry said.



Media Credit: Allie Garza

Jim Embry shows Gretchen L. Collins, a chalk artist and friend of Embry's, a photograph he took during his work with the Lexington Youth Green Corps yesterday afternoon at Third Street Stuff. The picture, "Gold Dust," shows a child working in a garden, smiling at the camera.



Media Credit: Allie Garza

Jim Embry finishes framing a picture yesterday afternoon at Third Street Stuff.



Media Credit: Ed Matthews

Students socialize at the Martin Luther King Jr. Cultural Center yesterday afternoon. Assistant to the director Jared Williams, said he's seen a dramatic increase in diversity awareness since he came to UK in 2000.