

Walkabout: Emerald View Park, a jewel of a trail, helps outdoor lovers be high over the city

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By Diana Nelson Jones, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

As Emerald View Park evolves in its loop around Mount Washington, Duquesne Heights and Allentown, it strikes me that the other parks of my lifetime seemed always to have been there.

The heavily wooded trails and plank foot bridges in the parks of my West Virginia youth seemed as natural as the rock walls that arched above them. My favorite, Audra State Park, was both wild and tame, part you and part other, a blending of worlds that happens almost nowhere else except in dreams.

The hand of man was obvious in the swing set near the toilet lodge and the picnic tables near the parking lot. But with the rapids of the Middle Fork River roaring in the background, the trails seemed hewn by the monstrous moss-covered boulders that shadowed them, the shade that darkened them and the occasional glitter of sun.

It was just wild enough to feel like an adventure without being one.

Emerald View Park, Pittsburgh's fifth regional park, has been an adventure in the making. Where now we can walk, Ilyssa Manspeizer and others once grabbed onto trees to keep from falling. At first, the crews of young trail builders couldn't believe what was expected of them, she said, "but look what they've done."

A looping swath of woods with views of the city through the trees, Emerald View Park is Pittsburgh's most dramatic park, even with just over four of 19 trail miles completed. It is also an inspiration of ambition at a time when funds for the natural world, and the natural world itself, are increasingly threatened.

Five years ago, the Mount Washington Community Development Corp. hired Ms. Manspeizer to direct and oversee the park's evolution from overgrown hillsides, dump sites and crumbled, abandoned

homesteads.

The process has unfolded in chapters of fundraising, land restoration, fundraising, land acquisition, fundraising and trail building. The total investment when all 257 acres are completed in about 20 years will equal \$8 million in today's dollars.

This evening, on the grassy slope just west of the "Point of View" statue on Grandview Avenue, the Mount Washington group will celebrate the latest mile of completed trail with live music, refreshments and trail tours that go up and down, from narrow wooded switchbacks to clearings with open views.

Tours will begin every 10 minutes from 5:30 to 6:20 p.m., starting from a no-outlet lane called Lizardi Way in Duquesne Heights and ending in the grassy clearing a mile later. You can register with Ms. Manspeizer at 412-481-3220 ext. 204 or imanspeizer@mwcdc.org.

Monday morning, as she and I padded over the soft dirt, I couldn't stop glancing to the right at my habitat -- the clusters of tiny buildings behind the North Shore's parking lots, casino and stadium.

Maybe I needed to confirm this could be happening, me walking along the city's iconic mountain that separates people places.

We ran into a group of young men who have spent four months carving this trail by hand.

Shawn Taylor, who started on the job last month, echoed what I felt: "No one down there would even think we could be up here walking around."

I began playing with the ideas of civilized and wild, natural and man-made. Knotweed is natural. A trail is man-made. A wild turkey is quiet. And several so-called civilized people were exchanging gunfire in the city during the hour we were on the trail.

Because of neglect, some places return to a wild that's inaccessible, alien and dangerous. Emerald View Park is being rescued.

From its last completed mile, more than 30 volunteers hauled out

40,000 to 60,000 pounds of dumped, man-made refuse.

"By building the trails, we are able to get in and make it better," Ms. Manspeizer said. "It was full of glass, plastics and other garbage, and wildlife had to put up with that. Now we can improve the habitat while we get more people to come in and care about it." When she said "care," I thought about how much public education a park can provide.

A half-mile in, she told me she will be saying a few words tonight as the community development group's director of park development and conservation. Among them might be "I have the best job in the world," she said.

If she has that, I have a runner-up; the first part of my workday was a walk in the woods. I was in the city and above it, my eye on the seats at Heinz Field, my ear tuned to the call and response of songbirds.

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