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Good-news story: How citizens fought to build their own park

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They scrapped and they fought for three years to get a bit of green grass for their children, and last Saturday they had reason to celebrate.

The swings were up and the grass stretched seven acres from Emerson Ave. to Dufferin St. -- the Wallace-Emerson residents association finally has its park.

It's not a big park, mind you. There's still a lot of work to be done but then again, it's a lot better than the tangle of empty and dilapidated warehouses that stood on the site a few years ago.

Adults like Rose and Mike DiFilippo, the husband and wife team that spearheaded the drive to get what they claim is the only park for a community of 10,000 people, say they will make sure the association won't stop just because they now have a space for play.

And kids like Diego Barbera of Emerson Ave., who played table tennis and pool for 24 hours to raise money for field hockey equipment, and Carlo Berlingieri, 14, who lent his stereo and record collection as entertainment say they will make sure the park is well used.

"It was an ugly site before this park. The buildings stood empty for a long time and we'd worry about the kids. If the children take good care of it and use it like they should, it will be a great boon for this district," said Grace Oliver who is 73 and lives on Lappin Ave.

She has lived in the neighbourhood for more than 50 years and remembers the days when the warehouses were new and exciting. Those days, she said, are long gone.

Mayor David Crombie was there to open the park. It was his fourth "opening" that day but this one was special because he had a hand in persuading the city to buy the land in 1973. He also presided over the meetings at which the city first changed its mind and started talking about putting a school there instead.

But then the city changed its mind again and even let the community keep the remaining building as a "neighbourhood improvement program office."

In addition, there's \$2.5 million "in various stages of approval" to set up permanent facilities and maybe even an ice rink. Three local residents groups, a senior citizens' representative and a youth delegate will decide what goes where.

"This park is not only a testimony, it shows that if a community wants something badly enough and co-operates and works together, it can get it," he told about 150 people.

He left in his chauffeur-driven limousine shortly after to attend another function, but the people's celebrations continued with films, a garage sale, food, music and dancing.