

# "Culmination of a dream": Outdoor classroom opens at Rock Spring Park

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**ALTON** - **Alton Middle School** students will be able to utilize a new outdoor classroom at **Rock Spring Park** thanks to a group effort from several community members and organizations.

A ribbon-cutting for the new classroom was held at 11 a.m. Thursday in Rock Spring Park near Alton Middle School. **Rock Spring 20/20 Chairperson Greg Gelzinnis** spoke on behalf of the park's improvements, which he described as coming at a "miraculous" pace. He said the classroom dedication was the "culmination of a dream."

"We called it 'Rock Spring 20/20' for a dual reason," he said. "Saying 20/20 makes you think of perfect vision, but it's also a year coming up. What we're saying is we want Rock Spring Park to have fulfilled a perfect vision by 2020. I think we'll get there in time. Back in 2013, when we started this whole thing, I never would have thought we would have gotten here so fast."

The outdoor classroom is the latest of several improvements throughout the park since the iconic waterfall was repaired more than a year ago. Since then, the park has utilized grants as well as private/public partnerships to install new sidewalks for walking and cycling through the park and a bioswale installed by students of **Lewis and Clark Community College (LCCC)** to improve water quality.

Change-makers behind all those improvements were invited to speak at the ribbon-cutting Thursday. The ribbon was cut by these change-makers with students and teachers from the middle school. Most of the speeches involved the park's bright distant past, a more sketchy recent past and a bright future hoping to overshadow them both - but only with the community's dedication and help.

**Alton Mayor Brant Walker** said he was happy the space was being utilized by the community more often with the improvements. He praised the installation of the new walking and cycling trail and complimented the works of the Grandpa Gang, who have been working to improve the park for years. The group creates the Rock Spring Christmas light displays.

"With these improvements, we're seeing more neighborhood kids in neighborhood parks," he said. "If we see more kids out here utilizing the park, we'll see less crime and opportunity for crime."



Under Walker's administration, which includes **Alton Parks and Recreation Director Michael Haynes**, parks across Alton had been constantly improving. When he spoke, Haynes said those improvements were direct results of several private/public partnerships, including this outdoor classroom as well as a \$17,000 grant from **Ameren Illinois** to improve the electrical wiring at **Riverview Park**.

"To provide a place for outdoor play and outdoor learning falls in line with our values," Haynes said. "I'm a little bit jealous, because we didn't have outdoor classrooms like this at our school."

Haynes shared his childhood interest in plants and the outdoors, saying the students at Alton Middle School now have a chance to do some hands-on learning in the new classroom.

**Virginia Woulfe-Beile** of the **Sierra Club** said she lived 600 yards from the new outdoor classroom as a child. She recounted stories of playing with Barbies at the waterfall. She said she was happy with the community's excitement returning to Rock Spring.

"I'm thrilled to see all the energy and excitement about this park," she said. "The Sierra Club is all about community collaboration. Private/public partnerships are what gets things done."



Woulfe-Beile was among many volunteers at the park last April clearing invasive species such as honeysuckle. She said the outdoor classroom may be a good chance to teach students about nature, ecology, invasive species and the importance of native plants.

Some native plants were used to create a bioswale in the park last spring. A bioswale is a collection of trenches and native species used to stop excess storm water from carrying pollutants to a water source (such as **Rock Spring Creek**). They may also be utilized to prevent such water sources from flash flooding in an event of sudden excessive rainfall.



That bioswale was created using a grant from **Illinois American Water**. The work was done by the the LCCC **Restoration Ecology** class with help from the LCCC-managed **YouthBuild** Program. **Sherry Kirbach**, who heads up the LCCC-managed YouthBuild program said the group is there for students between the ages of 16-24 who dropped out of high school.

"We don't encourage kids to drop out," she said. "But, we're there for the ones that do. We're a part of **Americorps** and LCCC's adult education program. Students in our group do 450 hours of volunteer service. We were up here dragging brush out of the woods and cutting invasive species. When the restoration ecology people were out here making the bioswale, some of our YouthBuild students joined them and got muddy from head to toe with them."

YouthBuild provided some of the labor for the structure, which was donated by **Calvary Cares**, a community outreach group from **Calvary Baptist Church**. **Calvary Baptist Senior Pastor Andre Dobson** spoke for 10 minutes to the students assembled from Alton Middle School about the church's dedication to the community.

"There are three C's besides the two C's in Calvary Cares," Dobson said. "Those three C's are even more important."

Dobson described those three C's in what he called an "inverted triangle." The first, he said, was community. He said his church was called to serve the community in which they lived. The second, he said was the church. Church, in this context, does not describe the building, Dobson said. He said it described the people who gather to worship. The third C, he said, was Christ. He said Christ was the reason his church reached out to the students. He then told the students from Alton Middle School how Christ was important in their lives and led them in a prayer.

Administrators from the **Alton School District** spoke on behalf of the outdoor classroom as well. **Interim Superintendent Mark Cappel** recalled his youth at the park.

"We used to have P.E. classes on the tennis courts over there, and we used to catch 'craw-dads' in the creek," he said.

**Alton Middle School Principal Cindy Inman** said the outdoor classroom would be utilized for students to learn science through being in nature. She said the location was a perfect place for students to understand the growth and reproduction cycle of plants.

After all the speakers had said a few words, they gathered with students and staff from Alton Middle School for the ribbon cutting. Science teacher **Sig Utgaard**, who wanted this classroom for a long time, chose a few of his students to operate the giant scissors for the event. Utgaard could not believe how quickly the idea became a reality.

"When I mentioned to Greg that we hoped to someday have an outdoor classroom here at the park, I never imagined that this dream would become a reality so quickly. It really is a miracle," Utgaard said in a release.