

The Venable Park Coalition aims to change the Beirne Park sign to read "Venable Park" by February 2020. The coalition believes the park needs visible signage telling the story of the Venables and how the city of Creve Coeur forced them to move because of their race. "The will of the majority of [Creve Coeur] is that something should be done [to honor the Venables]," Andrea Goldstein said. "That includes permanent signage at the park that tells the true story of how the park was founded and something on the Creve Coeur website as well." (Photo by Grace Hensley)



A HIDDEN HISTORY

Congregation Shaare Emeth aims to change name of Beirne Park

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Congregation Shaare Emeth and citizens of the Creve Coeur area are taking initiative to change the name of Beirne Park after learning the racist origins of the park's name.

"Two years ago, [Shaare Emeth] began a social justice listening campaign," Rabbi Andrea Goldstein at Shaare Emeth said. "One of our members, Jim Singer, told this story that he had uncovered of how [Beirne] Park came to be. After learning about it, [Singer] couldn't think about anything else because he [felt that] it was wrong, and justice needed to be brought. The story of the park didn't go away, [so] members of our congregation started working on it."

Beirne Park is located off of Spoede Road on a cul-de-sac within a neighborhood called Countryview Estates. The park was built in the 1950s after a neighborhood dispute between a black family and white citizens

living in the neighborhood. In April 1956, Dr. Howard and Katie Venable, along with 11 other black families, purchased lots in the neighborhood then known as Spoede Meadows. After doing so, they were approached by a committee of citizens within Creve Coeur and told that they weren't welcome to live there due to their race. The Venables were determined not to sell their lot and continued to build their house.

"[After the Venables chose not to sell], the committee of citizens came up with two proposed ordinances," Singer said. "If a group of neighbors came up with money for a park land acquisition, the city would then take the property that the citizens had designated and turn it into a park. The second ordinance was that they would take the Venable's lot for this park. A lawsuit was filed against the Venable's property in October [1956], and this lawsuit dragged on for three years. Finally, the Missouri Court of Appeals ruled in favor of the city. The Venables were forced out."

Howard was an ophthalmologist and one of the first black professors at the Washington University School of Medicine in Saint Louis. He worked at Homer G. Phillips Hospital, Creve Coeur's hospital for people of color. Howard was respected within his community. However,

his prominence and admiration from others did not protect him from the forces of racism.

“Dr. Venable was a pillar in his community, and people really looked up to him, but he was still treated very badly by Creve Coeur,” Andrea said. “The other families folded right away and left, but the Venables fought back, and their case went to the Missouri State Supreme Court.”

The park is currently named after John T. Beirne, the mayor of Creve Coeur at the time. Beirne was the leader of the white resistance to keep black people out of Spoede Meadows. As the citizens of Creve Coeur started to learn the original beginnings of Beirne Park, they started to try to fix the wrongdoings the city of Creve Coeur committed in the past.

The goal of Shaare Emeth’s campaign is to spread awareness and make amends. The campaign is hoping to not only change the name of the park, but also to have Creve Coeur publicly recognize their past actions by creating permanent signage at the park and on the Creve Coeur website telling the Venable’s history. Additionally, they hope to create some form of curriculum that teaches students the story in history classes at school.

“Some people are also talking about [the city of Creve Coeur] or private citizens making a contribution to the Venable Foundation at Washington University St. Louis that helps low-income African American students attend medical school,” Andrea said.

This project is set to be completed by February 2020, as that is Black History Month. In order to achieve this goal, Singer, Andrea and other supporters must convince Creve Coeur city officials that proceeding with this plan is what the majority of Creve Coeur wants to do. The supporters of this project want to educate the public so that the history of the park’s origins is known to as many people as possible. Senior Eli Goldstein, a member of Shaare Emeth and Andrea’s son, is trying to make Ladue students aware of the story.

“[The story of the park] is a reminder that the history we read about in our textbooks happens right down the road from where we live,” Eli said. “It’s helpful to see that things still need to be changed, even within our school. We preach about diversity, and then we forget. Even things like the name of the park are a reminder of the history of our city that kept black people out of their neighborhoods.” ■



When I was a kid, I used to go to Beirne Park every day. When I realized that a place I have such a strong childhood connection with has this deep history, I wanted more people to know about it.”

-Eli Goldstein, 12



COFFEE with the MAYOR



LOCATION: Danforth Plant Center. 975 N. Warson Road.

DATE AND TIME: Nov. 6. at 7:00 p.m.

OBJECTIVE: Discuss the history of the park and what can be done in the near future to make amends.



SPEAKERS: Creve Coeur Mayor Barry Glantz and Venable Park Coalition leader Jim Singer will give a presentation.