

Park Support Groups of Baltimore City: **The Northeast Youth Association**

In the heart of the Mid-Govans community stands 14 ½ acres of green known as DeWees Park. Although DeWees had long been a center for youth sports and community gatherings, it was allowed to slip into serious disrepair as the neighborhood itself struggled. Then, in 2003, the Northeast Youth Association (NEYA) realized a dream and installed a professional-quality football field in the once defunct park.

NEYA was originally formed in 1994 as the Northeast Football League. Then, as now, the organization ran football teams for neighborhood kids. But in 1999, a new executive board decided to widen the group's focus, and adopted the current name to reflect a new emphasis on education and support as well as athletics. Today, Northeast runs six youth football teams (ranging in age groups from 5 to 14 years), two cheerleading teams, a summer football camp, and a tutoring program.

The driving force behind NEYA is the Rogers family, which has been involved with the group since 1996 and makes up five of the organization's ten board members. Members of the family helped implement many small efforts to improve DeWees Park, so as to provide their kids with a better, safer place to play. Their lucky break came when Greg Rogers saw an ad in the paper for the NFL's Grassroots Community Football Fields Program.

It took a year and a half of phone calls and letter writing to get the Grassroots grant for NEYA. The organization

managed to enlist the support of a number of city officials, who wrote letters of support to the NFL and lobbied the mayor's office to provide matching funds. The Baltimore City Department of Recreation & Parks provided \$50,000 to match the NFL's \$100,000 contribution and, in July of 2003, the new DeWees football field finally became a reality.

As a city-based organization, NEYA has never had the sort of parental and community support, in terms of either time or money, that youth football leagues in the suburbs often enjoy. To suddenly have a \$150,000 field with a new scoreboard, sod, irrigation, and bleachers was truly a dream come true. This triumph could never have come about without a few key factors: dogged persistence, effective networking, and the personal touch of the organization's leaders.

The NFL Grassroots grant is administered through the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), and when a representative from that organization came to visit, the Rogers didn't take her out to a fancy restaurant. Instead they invited her, along with an older teen who had once been in their football program, into their house for a home-cooked meal. This approach is characteristic of these outgoing people, who seem to remember every name and anecdote they come across.

The members of NEYA didn't stop after getting the NFL grant. In 2004, the group signed a partnership agreement with Recreation & Parks for the

maintenance of DeWees. Today, the Department pays \$7,000 per year to a professional lawn care company for seeding, fertilizing, and other maintenance activity in DeWees. In return, NEYA mows and performs other free services to take care of the park. In addition, NEYA has secured other grants from multiple foundations, both for renovations and for team uniforms. One of these was a Partnerships for Parks grant, administered by the Parks & People Foundation and funded by Recreation & Parks, to install a new practice field in DeWees.

Despite these successes, day-to-day funding remains a major issue, due to the high costs of insurance and equipment.

Other strategies for covering these expenses have included carwashes, pizza sales, and a bus trip to Atlantic City. Money is always tight, and volunteer help is not consistently reliable, but the Rogers family remains optimistic.

“When you have a dream, people will tell you it isn’t possible,” said Greg Rogers. Not too long ago, kids had to don gloves and sweep up glass and trash before they could play football on DeWees’s fields. Now, many in the community treat the park with a new degree of respect. The best reward of all, says Greg, has been seeing that the kids truly appreciate all of the hard work that has been done for their benefit.



The new scoreboard at DeWees Park

WHAT: The Northeast Youth Association

WHERE: DeWees Park in the Mid-Govans community of northern Baltimore City

WHEN: Since 1999

WHY: To lay a groundwork for tomorrow’s leader by providing young inner city men and women with the skills to increase their academic and social awareness, responsibility, and accountability

Based on interviews with Greg Rogers and Arlene Rogers and on information compiled during the summer of 2006.