

Award for Programs for the Disadvantaged in Memory of Carolyn Keane

POPULATIONS OF 50,000 AND UNDER



JAMES D. HOCK

ICMA's Excellence Award for Programs for the Disadvantaged, established in memory of Carolyn Keane, recognizes a local government that has enhanced the quality of life for the disadvantaged, including homeless citizens and people with AIDS. This year, ICMA presents the award in the 50,000-and-under category to Oak Park, Michigan, and City Manager James D. Hock for the Lessenger Community Park.

Lessenger Park began as the dream of one man but soon became the dream of an entire community. The success of the venture represents the collaborative efforts of the city of Oak Park (pop. 29,793), the Oak Park Schools, the Jewish Federation's Neighborhood Project, and Harold Kulish, the private benefactor whose dream it was to build a park for the residents of his community. In 1997, Mr. Kulish approached the Neighborhood Project about making such a contribution to his community and soon had the city and others in the community engaged in the effort.

The initial planning team decided to locate the park on a piece of property near Lessenger Elementary School in the southeastern part of the city. This is a culturally diverse, low-income, transient neighborhood; the elementary school experiences about a 30-percent turnover in the student body each year. The group felt that this economically disadvantaged neighborhood and its children would have the most to gain from the park.

During 2000, the Lessenger School Park Committee—which included Mr. Kulish and representatives from the Neighborhood Project, the Lessenger Elementary School, and the city of Oak Park—held a series of meetings to develop a design for the park and discuss how to equip it. The city donated two benches, a picnic table, a barbecue grill, trees, flowers for a community garden, and the assistance of the department of public works. At the dedication in May 2000, Mr. Kulish hosted a hot dog lunch, complete with musical entertainment from a steel drum band sponsored by the elementary school. Under the guidance of city staff, Lessenger students planted the flowers and at-risk students from nearby Roosevelt Middle School helped plant the trees.

Even after the park's dedication, the collaborative efforts continued. Parents joined the public works staff to water the flowers during the summer; a builder's association auxiliary gave tree saplings and coloring books to students; and additional tables, benches, and barbecue grills were donated. Maintaining its strong involvement in the project, the committee developed an after-school program of gym activities for Lessenger students, and in December 2001, it supported an ethnic festival at the school that included student performances, games, and a "taste fest" of foods of the African-American, Chaldean, and Vietnamese communities. These programs have

been as valuable to the community as has the park itself.

The seeds of cooperation planted in the spring of 2000 have grown into a lasting partnership among diverse groups of the city. By working together, the partners have gained more than just a beautiful park; the park has brought the community together as a group, uniting residents, students, and city and school staff. Picnics, barbecues, and even family reunions are a common sight there. The at-risk students who helped plant the trees and who participate in planting the garden each year watch over the park and have a sense of ownership. Foot traffic has increased in the neighborhood, and youth vandalism has decreased by about 50 percent.

The enthusiasm and commitment of the city and its partners show no signs of waning. The partners have recently committed to a five-year plan to develop an outdoor classroom, to which they will contribute additional equipment. Students are collecting returnable bottles and cans to help raise money for more flowers and trees. The Lessenger Park Program illustrates that much can be gained through the influence of one person's vision when the right partners are involved, and it is a living testimony to Oak Park's commitment to its disadvantaged residents. ■

Oak Park students plant flowers in the city's newly developed Lessenger Park.

