

Whether you're a long-time Philadelphia resident, an empty-nester who has just moved to the city, or an immigrant hoping to start a new life, there are a few things that bind Philadelphians to city life.

A "Greatest Hits" of City Parks

BY NICHOLAS ESPOSITO

There's the pride felt in being from a particular neighborhood. There's the amazing amenity of simply walking out of your house to the bar or café just a few blocks away. But there is one aspect of city life that is not always given enough credit when explaining why people choose to live here—our parks.

A city park is not just an open green space. It's a communal backyard. It's where people garden together and picnic together. It's where children learn how to play with other children. And it's where residents from a diversity of backgrounds learn how to become neighbors. As someone who has worked in many Philadelphia parks, I'm offering my "greatest hits."

Clark Park

When I lived in West Philly, I always boasted that since I was so close to Clark Park, I never needed to make plans. A typical Saturday would begin with a stroll down to the year-round Food Trust farmers market on the east side of the park. My favorite stand was the Landis Farm stand, where I could buy beautiful root vegetables along with some of the leanest, most delicious ground beef I have ever tasted.

After sneaking in a visit to the Amish family's stand for a whoopee pie, there would almost inevitably be a flea market or music festival underway. I've seen everything from an impromptu Brazilian samba concert erupt in the main square on the north side of the park, to one of my favorite performances of Shakespeare's *Midsummer's Night Dream* in the natural amphitheater (once a mill pond) on the south side. With beautiful landscape gardens, created and maintained by the many talented residents in the neighborhood, this is the perfect example of a community using a park for everything it is worth.

Liberty Lands

Liberty Lands park sits on what used to be the American Street Tannery in Northern Liberties. Over two decades community members, with the help of PHS, developed a 37-plot community garden that I think is one of the most attractive in the city. There's also a stage area for performances, equipped with a stormwater catchment basin underneath, and a rain garden.

One day, our local herb club in Kensington took a sojourn down to Liberty Lands for a picnic and a sampling of the dandelion and hawthorne berry infusions that had been collected in and around the park. As I sat under the



Illustration by Ben Leech

cherry blossoms that line the playground area and watched the kids run up and down the jungle gym while we all enjoyed our potluck and "urban herbs," I was in awe of the neighborhood's transformation. In this area that was once a backdrop to decaying urban industry, seeing this renewed life of both plants and people was extremely powerful.

Wissahickon Park

The Wissahickon Creek runs 23 miles from Philadelphia's northwestern suburbs to the Schuylkill, but the most traveled part is a trail in Northwest Philly called Forbidden Drive. Although this trail is often crowded with runners, walkers, and bicyclists, many people do not take the trouble to explore the side trails that branch off.

My favorite trail leads to what is known as Shakespeare Rock and Devil's Pool. My West Philly housemate introduced me to it one hot April day. As we trekked down the trail, I was amazed to see the narrow path give way to a huge rock overlooking a tranquil pool of water fed by a tributary into the creek. I was also shocked when I realized that we couldn't hear cars or people because we were that far into the woods. I admit that I took the 20-foot plunge off the rock into the cool water (against park rules), experiencing something that few other urbanites get to do, just by taking a 30-minute bike ride.

I imagine that these three parks are probably on many Philadelphians' lists. But there are hundreds more throughout the city that provide the community space of Liberty Lands and Clark Park, as well as the tranquility of the Wissahickon. The best part of living in Philadelphia is taking the time to explore each one.

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