

It May Be Hell's Kitchen But It Is Also Bob's Park

By DOREEN CARVAJAL

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Monica Almeida/The New York Times

Bob's Park, a newly opened private park on West 35th Street, was already drawing fans to its jungle gym yesterday. The park is named after a Hell's Kitchen fixture, Bob Kennedy, who died three years ago.

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In a narrow sliver of Hell's Kitchen — blooming with dogwood and signs announcing the opening of the first neighborhood park in more than half a century — no one enters without passing the dark, doleful eyes of "Bob."

The wistful black and white photograph of Bob Kennedy marks the entrance of Bob's Park, a small pocket of green on West 35th Street where Mr. Kennedy lived, died, and was known as just plain Bob.

"We talked about what we could name the park," said Joe Restuccia, a neighbor who helped organize the \$100,000 park project. "We decided we didn't want to call it Robert Kennedy Park because that sounds like a somebody. We wanted a name that sounded like our somebody, Bob's Park."

To his friends and neighbors of 35 years, Mr. Kennedy was the self-appointed patrolman of West 35th Street who chased away drug dealers and his own insomnia by standing guard outside their homes in the morning darkness.

He was their annual Christmas Santa, their neighborhood warrior, a jewelry maker with shoulder-length brown hair who liked to dress in feathered American Indian head-dresses and Scottish kilts, with a boa constrictor dangling from his shoulders.

Best to remember him that way, said his neighbors, who affectionately noted that Mr. Kennedy was buried in his kilts. Three years ago, Mr. Kennedy was stabbed to death in his crumbling apartment, where he had insisted on remaining despite court battles with his landlords and periods without electricity or hot water. His killer was never found.

The Clinton housing group bought Mr. Kennedy's apartment building in 1991 with plans to renovate it to provide low-cost housing for senior

A tribute to the self-appointed patrolman of West 35th Street.

their conversations at dawn.

Mr. Kennedy would pass her a cup of coffee through her first-floor window. They would share secrets, such as the mysterious disappearance of Mr. Kennedy's boa constrictor, which vanished for nearly four years. When the boa was finally found, Mrs. Amore said, Mr. Kennedy's building was relatively free of rats and mice; the boa measured some eight feet.

"For 15 years, he fought to stay in his home while several landlords tried to force him and his neighbors to leave," Mrs. Amore wrote in a tribute to Mr. Kennedy that hangs in the park. "In the worst of times, Bob believed this small, tough, gray block of 35th Street, next to the Lincoln Tunnel, could be a better place. When Bob Kennedy planted a rosebush next to the tree outside his apartment window, nobody touched it. Bob is gone, but not forgotten, a truly unique individual who made a difference."

In the year before Mr. Kennedy died, he was part of a small determined group of five tenants who refused to leave their apartment building even though the staircases were so deteriorated that the residents had to use ladders to reach different stories. Residents still remember with fondness how Mr. Kennedy, wearing a Blackfoot Indian warrior's headdress, attended one of the court hearings involving the building.

"You don't know how we suffered," recalled Rita Ross, who was part of the group of tenants who refused to leave. "At the end, we had rats, mice, no heat, no hot water. I only wish Bob could be here now to see how things have changed for the better."

The narrow row house where Mr. Kennedy devoted his last 15 years has been gutted, its brick front cleaned and repainted. The grand opening of the refurbished building is scheduled for later this month. Mrs. Ross, who moved away for 18 months while the renovations took place, was one of the first tenants to return.

Mr. Kennedy suffered from diabetes, and often had trouble sleeping so he would move outdoors to sit on a stool on the sidewalk. There he would monitor the activities of local drug dealers and prostitutes, the neighbors said.

A few weeks ago, volunteers planted a new Gingko tree marking the spot where Mr. Kennedy would sit for hours in darkness. Mr. Kennedy's rosebush is now gone, replaced with dusty miller, pink queen cleome and blue ageratum.

But his longtime neighbor, Raul Conti, an artist and sculptor from Argentina, cannot erase the picture of Mr. Kennedy standing guard. The naming of Bob's Park is a great tribute, he said, but the park needs something more.

"I want to make him a monument," Mr. Conti said in Spanish. He has a vague idea for the design. It will incorporate Indian symbols to honor Mr. Kennedy, who was an adopted member of the Blackfoot tribe.

But most importantly, he said, the figure will be seated.

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The new park can be entered with a key bought for \$1.25.

citizens and the mentally ill.

As part of that development, the group proposed a small, pocket park that can be entered with a key purchased for \$1.25. It is the first new park created in Hell's Kitchen since the 1938 opening of the Schermerhorn Playground on West 38th Street, which was demolished in 1953 with the construction of the Lincoln Tunnel.

"We had told him about the plans," said Mr. Restuccia, who is the executive director for the development group. "He said to me that he wouldn't live to see it."

He was right, of course, but three years after his death, the neighbors still wanted to share something with a man who seemed to love the neighborhood more than his life. Kay Amore, a resident of the block for more than four decades, still misses