


Off the streets

Frog Hollow parents wanted a place for their kids, so they fought for - and got - the \$5 million Pope Park Recreational Center

By JOHNNY MASON JR.  Special to The Courant

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When you think of a playground activity, you don't usually think of kids flipping off a second-floor back porch onto a heap of torn-up mattresses.

But that's one of the gymnastic tricks Juan Perez, 13, and his neighborhood buddies used to perform routinely from a Zion Street apartment building. The kids took great delight in challenging each other to see who could do the most daring feat, Juan said.

"Sometimes we even jump from the roof," said Juan's best friend, Angel Santiago, 12. "But that can get dangerous."

The new \$5 million Pope Park Recreational Center, which opened in November, has replaced his backyard playground, Juan said. He and friends haven't collected any more beat-up mattresses. Instead, they're at the center after school and on Saturdays.

On a recent Saturday morning, the youths shot pool at the center, which was bustling with kids talking and laughing and the sound of pool balls clicking and basketballs bouncing.

The bright-gold Frog Hollow center, located in Pope Park, has an indoor Olympic-size pool, a gymnasium, a multi-purpose auditorium, a kitchen, a weight room, and a game room with Ping-Pong tables, pool tables and Foosball games.

"We're here all the time," said Juan, an eighth-grader at Quirk Middle School. "I can't believe this is here."

Just who first had the idea to build a Frog Hollow area recreation center is open to debate, but nearly everyone agrees that the project's completion was possible only through the combined efforts of community members and city hall.

"This is how the process is supposed to work," said Mayor Michael Peters. "The community and city hall made this happen. It's fantastic."

It was more than five years ago when parents, community activists, city and state officials and members of Hartford Areas Rally Together teamed up to create what one city official called an "explosion of hope."

Although the process seemed long and even impossible at times, it succeeded because of the neighborhood's desire to give their children a safe and first-class recreation and community center, said Nancy Galarza, a Russ Street resident who helped start the campaign to create the center.

During the more than five-year building process, Galarza learned how to fight for what she wants and not to be intimidated, she said. "It took so long and it was scary. There were a lot of meetings. First there was money, then there wasn't enough money," she said.

Frog Hollow neighbors were fed up with gang violence that raged in the area's streets during the early 1990s, Galarza said. Fearing for the safety of her four children, she, like many parents, protected her children by keeping them inside. With temperatures ranging in the 90s, Galarza remembered those hot summer days and nights when her children cried and complained about not being able to play outside.

It was the summer of 1992 when neighbors decided they wanted to find a safe place for their kids to play.

"I was in a bad mood that summer," she said. "Then all the neighbors decided to get together."

The neighbors sought the help of Edgar Villarroel, a community organizer with Hartford Areas Rally Together, who in turn helped get neighbors to meet with city and state representatives to express the need for a center.

The coalition of parents canvassed the

What's there

Among the facilities at the new Pope Park Recreational Center in Hartford's Frog Hollow neighborhood:

- an indoor, Olympic-sized pool
- a gymnasium
- a weight room
- an auditorium
- a kitchen
- a game room with Ping-Pong, pool and Foosball

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Frog Hollow parents brought recreation center to fruition

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neighborhood, made phone calls and visited several recreation and community centers to get ideas on what they wanted their center to be like.

After visiting city recreation centers such as the Kelvin D. Anderson Center in Hartford's North End, neighbors started to expand their expectations. Their initial idea of creating a recreational center in an abandoned store front grew, said Penny Leto, who has overseen the project for the parks and recreation division of the city department of human services.

"The whole process was step-by-step," Leto said. "Because it's a long process and there's a lot of community involvement, you get a lot of new people along the way who might want to do something different."

In November 1992, Hartford voters approved the \$4 million bond to build the recreation center in Pope Park. The city also obtained money from a park trust fund to build the center.

James Vance, of James Vance & Associates of Hartford, the architect who designed the building, said because of the project's limited budget, he tried to utilize all the building's space. The game room serves as the center's main area and is connected to three other widely used areas: the gymnasium, pool and multi-purpose room.

The entry way and several outside walls, such as in the pool area and game room, have glass sections that allow more natural sunlight while giving visitors a picturesque view of the surrounding park, Vance said.

"You want to put light into the building where it will be used and appreciated, but you don't want it where it will have a negative impact, like the gymnasium," Vance said. "I'm real proud of it. I think it turned out really well."

After two years of meetings and false starts, Maramba Builders Inc., of Hartford, started construction in late 1994. A series of delays pushed back the completion from its scheduled December 1995 date until late last year.

The planned project was redesigned to cut building costs in February 1994, after all the construction bids came in about \$1.3 million over budget. City officials met with Frog Hollow neighbors to talk about the changes to the center.

Residents were upset that cutting costs would mean eliminating programs or major attractions, such as the indoor swimming pool.

Although city officials said most of the savings came from changing interior building materials and reducing room sizes, many residents

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Hartford Mayor Michael Peters

disagreed with the city's cost-cutting design changes.

The planned 33,000-square-foot building was trimmed by 3,000 square feet when architects reduced the multi-purpose room, weight room and redesigned the pool area.

"In reality there's no difference," said Frank Vernice, facilities manager for the department of public works. "It's really functional. People are really enjoying it."

Frog Hollow residents met with city officials several times during 1993, expressing concern about plans to demolish the existing outdoor pool in Pope Park to make room for the center. Changes were made when architects and city officials decided to rotate and elevate the center to save the outdoor pool.

The naming of the building also generated controversy.

In April 1995, the city council passed a resolution to name the center in honor of Samuel Vincente Arroyo, a 22-year-old Hartford man who had been killed in a drive-by shooting two years earlier.

The young man was a School Street resident and the son of Ramon L. Arroyo, a 3rd District Democratic town committee member and Puerto Rican activist. Samuel Vincente Arroyo died after he was shot in the head while sitting in a car outside the home of his wife's parents. Arroyo, who worked as an assistant manager of a Carvel ice cream store and had been elected a city constable in 1991, had no criminal record and was mistaken for a gang member, police suspected.

A coalition of Frog Hollow residents objected to the resolution, calling it a political move. They said although the shooting was a tragedy, the recreation center should not favor any individual or family, except for the Pope family.

The park was named by Col. Albert A. Pope, the industrialist who manufactured Columbia bicycles on Capitol Avenue in the late 1800s. Pope donated 90 acres of land for the park.

Ramon L. Arroyo said more than 1,500 people signed a petition supporting the naming of the center for his son, and said members of the city council allowed the issue to be-



Rick Hartford / The Hartford Courant

■ Eliezer Castro, 17, left, and Joel Echevarria, 15, both of Hartford, share a game of Foosball at the Pope Park Recreational Center.

come a political football.

"The important thing is my community has a new center," Arroyo said. "We can't lose sight that kids have a safe place to play."

The city council and the community compromised, and the center was dedicated to Samuel Vincente Arroyo. A large bronze plaque memorializing him hangs on a wall in the center's game room.

At the center's dedication ceremony in November, about 60 community leaders, city politicians and members of various neighborhood organizations praised the center, calling it a blessed moment for Hartford and example of cooperation and partnership in action.

The center served 2,000 people in the first two weeks it opened and nearly 400 people use the center each day. On any given night the center is used by as many as 140 youths, said Ramon Rojano, director of the city department of human services.

Local groups such as HART also use the multi-purpose rooms for meetings, banquets and youth and adult programs. The city's recreation and youth services division offers programs there that include boys and girls basketball leagues,

arts and crafts, swimming lessons, soccer classes and gymnastic classes.

The center is open weekdays from 3 to 9 p.m. and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Mostly junior high school youths use the center from 3 to 6 p.m. and high school youths use it after 6 p.m. It is staffed by recreation division employees.

"We have kids as young as 7 years old," said Albert Gonzalez, a recreation leader, who works at the center six days a week. "If they can reach the tables, they can play."

But the center serves as more than just an alternative to hanging around the neighborhood, Gonzalez said.

Recreation staff members work with youths to teach them social skills, such as how to interact with other youths and staff, settle differences without fighting and learn simple courtesies such as saying thank-you and please, Gonzalez said.

Understanding and cooperation between youths and the staff is essential, Gonzalez said, especially in a setting where youths can sometimes outnumber staff 50-1.

"When they understand you,

something happens. It's just a way of clicking. It's gratifying," he said.

Barry Lubin, an engineer who has lived nearby on Columbia Street for 13 years, said it's too early to see the center's impact on the neighborhood. He said his street has seen less crime than others in the area and few youth live there.

His greatest fear is that the center might become neglected and a hangout for gang members.

"My hope is it can give the kids a positive forum, somewhere where they can have positive experiences and turn around and build on those successes," Lubin said.

The center's rules are strictly enforced by recreational staff and anyone who misbehaves is asked to leave, said Rojano said.

In a community plagued by abandoned buildings and crime, Rojano is determined to keep the neighborhood's new "jewel" well-maintained and to fight against vandalism and crime problems, he said.

His greatest challenge is finding a way to accommodate the huge number of youths and adults who want to use it, he said.

Traditionally, he said, parents drop off their kids at recreation centers, turning them into hangouts for

youth.

He envisions a different, more family-oriented approach for the Pope Park center, making it a family resource center that will offer activities for families who want to do things together as well as services for troubled families.

Rojano plans to invite local groups to offer courses for youth and adults, such as adult education and computer classes. He also would like to see the center have a Friends of Pope Park organization, similar to the group established to support Keney Park in the North End.

"There is no way to say one single person really made this beautiful center possible. It was a combination of many hard-working people," he said. "But now we want to make this a place to help to strengthen families." Villarreal hopes to get the pond at the other end of the park cleaned up so youths can skate during the winter. He'd also like to refurbish an abandoned Park Terrace apartment building to house a museum on Col. Albert Pope.

"Those are my two dreams," Villarreal said. "And why not? Look what we've accomplished already."