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Open once again: the Pearly Gates

by Patrick Rocchio

It's a rare moment when the term "opening the pearly gates" has absolutely no religious connotation.

Pearly Gates playground officially reopened with a ribbon-cutting on Saturday, September 25, as the finishing touches are being put on a \$1.9 million reconstruction of the St. Peter's Avenue recreational gem.

Community members, boy scouts, girl scouts, and members of the Westchester Square Zerega Improvement Organization were all on hand. The latter group also provided face painting for the kids. The organization has been a driving force in the redevelopment of the playground, for which it has been an advocate for about 20 years.

The playground features new play equipment for 5- to 12-year-olds such as spinning units, a balance beam and a spray shower. New enhancements include handicapped-accessible entrances, expanded green space and ornamental designs, new site furniture, and perimeter fencing. Playspace between older and younger children have also been separated, and passive seating has been expanded.

There is also a sustainable rain garden that absorbs water during heavy rainstorms and keeps the playground from flooding.

"We are pleased to finish the renovation of Pearly Gates Playground, bringing more worthiness to its name," said Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe. "The new park is fun, safe, and eco-friendly for the community, with improved ADA-access, double the number of swings and triple the number of slides as the old park."

Funding for the reconstruction was provided through a partnership of three elected officials: Councilman Jimmy Vacca, who provided \$900,000 in funding, along with \$524,000 from Borough President Ruben Diaz and \$500,000 from Councilwoman Annabel Palma.

Vacca said that the renovated playground is part of a larger plan he has for the Westchester Square area, which includes bringing Bronx Council on the Arts to the Square, renovating Owen Dolen Park, and improving the Huntington Library.

"Pearly Gates Park serves as one of the most vibrant and growing communities in my district, and I am thrilled to secure \$900,000 to fund this major renovation," Vacca said. "The new Pearly Gates is more accessible, more attractive, safer, and most importantly, more fun. I can't wait to see how local children and families react."

Assemblyman Michael Benedetto and Community Board 10 parks committee chairwoman Virginia Gallagher also made remarks at the ceremony. Benedetto said that he "cannot help but smile" when he enters the park. Gallagher urged all community members to keep the park safe and clean and realize that this community playground belongs to them.

Sandi Lusk, of WSZIO, said that she first began trying to improve the playground when her children were growing up, about 20 years ago. She said that for years the park was strewn with rubble as an earlier renovation in the 1990s stalled. WSZIO has been working on the current reconstruction with Parks, elected officials, and CB 10 for the past five years. Lusk presented Councilman Jimmy Vacca with an award on behalf of WSZIO for his dedication to this project.

"We are starting again all over 20 years later," Lusk said. "but we are in a much better place because now there is money available for children's programs."

"Today, we drive a stake through the heart of the past and begin anew." ■