

At its grand reveal, renovated Perry Harvey Sr. Park touted as 'a living, breathing history lesson'

By Katie Mettler, Times Staff Writer

Sunday, April 3, 2016 10:10pm

TAMPA

Not 30 minutes before he arrived at the grand debut of the renovated Perry Harvey Sr. Park on Sunday afternoon, Tampa native Tony Crawford listened to his 67-year-old mother reminisce about the lively black community that once thrived there.

She told him about the way things were on Central Avenue, before the shooting and the riots and the Interstate 4 invasion 50 years ago. She spoke of the barber shops, hair salons and pool halls that lined the neighborhood, about the dancing and the music.

She mentioned the Cozy Corner, a famous barbecue joint owned by the iconic Moses White.

She was friends with Perry Harvey himself — the union boss and civil rights leader — for whom the park is named.

So when Crawford strolled along the park's north end, weaving through the Leaders' Row art installment, the 51-year-old already recognized many of the figures memorialized there.

"My parents grew up on Central," he said. "I was born in Tampa Park."

Crawford felt, he said, that Perry Harvey Sr. Park contained his history.

That was the goal of its grand reopening Sunday, a chance to bring the Tampa community together with food and music for a historical celebration decades in the making.

"This is not a proclamation, this is forever," said Mayor Bob Buckhorn during an invocation ceremony at the park's newly constructed Performance Plaza. "Let's make this a living, breathing history lesson."

Democratic state Sen. Arthenia Joyner, a Tampa native whose father, Henry Joyner, owned the Cotton Club and was a Central Avenue giant, gave the crowd of 1,000 a historical primer.

The area that later became Perry Harvey Sr. Park first was called "the Scrub," an enclave northeast of downtown Tampa where emancipated slaves settled in 1865. Businesses and restaurants opened along Central Avenue, and the area became what Joyner called the "Harlem of the South."

Music and the arts thrived. After watching children dance on the busy artery, Hank Ballard penned the hit song *The Twist*. James Brown, Cab Calloway, Ray Charles, Ella Fitzgerald and B.B. King all performed there.

By the 1930s, black business in the area bubbled above 200.

But the construction of Interstate 4 arrived, and urban renewal projects, which Joyner called "urban removal" projects, disrupted Central Avenue, and in 1967 riots over race erupted.

In 1974, Joyner's father's business, the Cotton Club, was the last on Central Avenue to close.

Five years later, a group of young people in the neighborhood asked the city for a place to play, and Perry Harvey Sr. Park was born. As a longshoreman at the Tampa docks, Harvey advocated for better pay and working conditions by organizing the International Longshoreman's Association. He fought for civil rights and education.

"He was a towering figure in this community," Joyner said. "He helped create a middle class in this town for black people."

Joyner called the park a model for the nation, and implored the crowd to come often, and bring their children.

Tampa City Council chairman Frank Reddick spoke as well, challenging all of the local schools to make a mandatory field trip to the park.

Dorothy Harvey Keel, Perry Harvey's eldest daughter, echoed that sentiment.

"It's very important they know who they are," she said.

On what her father would have thought of the day, she said he would have called it "a beautiful thing."

Others in the crowd included Tampa police Chief Eric Ward, county commissioners and housing authority officials.

A sidewalk that also serves as a timeline starts at the park's south end, offering bits of history as it snakes along the entirety of the park, past clay tile murals and art installations that change as you walk past them.

It ends just past a new statue of Perry Harvey Sr. Beyond that are three new basketball courts and more green space.

And at the park's northernmost tip is the Bro Bowl, the object of much consternation and the reason for some delay in the park's re-development. The skatepark was originally poured at the park's center. When the city began talks to revitalize the area, skateboard activists who treasured the bowl fought to get it on the National Register of Historic Places — and succeeded.

Eventually, the city maintained several key elements from the old Bro Bowl in a new skatepark built at the north end of the park.

Jeffrey Fauntleroy, 53, was on the mayor's African American Advisory Council, and fought hard to maintain federal funding for the park's renovation.

On Sunday, he and his wife admired the finished product.

"It was a task, but a worthwhile task," he said. "It was worth all of the late-night meetings, all the arguments. It was worth it all."

Contact Katie Mettler at kmettler@tampabay.com or (813) 226-3446. Follow @kmettler.



SPONSORED CONTENT



The SIEMENS hearing aid of the future is here

Hear.com



7 Outrageous Credit Cards If You Have Excellent Credit

NextAdvisor



Gigi Hadid's Sneakers Are Work And Weekend-Appropriate

WhoWhatWear



Thinking About Installing Solar Panels? Read This First

Energy Bill Cruncher



If you have a job, you must use this tool

dapulse



24 Makeup Routines All Older Women Should Know

Front Page Weekly

Recommended by

TAP FOR MORE

LATEST NEWS

1. **North Korea vows harsh retaliation against new U.N. sanctions**

7 MINUTES AGO | **World** | *Associated Press*

SEOUL, South Korea — North Korea vowed Monday to bolster its nuclear arsenal and gain revenge of a "thousand-fold" against the United States in response to tough U.N. sanctions imposed following its recent intercontinental ballistic missile tests.



2. **Watch live: Locale Market, Mise en Place meet tonight in Epic Chef Showdown semifinals**

28 MINUTES AGO | **General** | *Times staff*

TAMPA — Round 5 of the third annual Epic Chef Showdown to benefit Feeding Tampa Bay is Monday night, and you can watch it live right here.



3. **Owner of Legoland interested in buying Busch Gardens**

44 MINUTES AGO | **Florida** | *By Sharon Kennedy Wynne, Times Staff Writer*

Merlin Entertainment, owner of Legoland, is interested in buying Busch Gardens from its troubled parent company, SeaWorld Entertainment.



4. **Despite pleas, HART okays bus system cutting 20 percent of routes**

51 MINUTES AGO | **Mass Transit** | *By Caitlin Johnston, Times Staff Writer*

TAMPA — Motivated by harsh financial realities, Hillsborough transit board members approved a plan Monday that will eliminate nearly 20 percent of bus routes despite emotional pleas from riders who rely on them.



5. **Pasco County schools, Sheriff's Office, unveil new approach to campus threats**

3:04 PM | **Blogs** | *Jeffrey S. Solochek*

In a change from past practice, Pasco County students and teachers will be taught how to fight back -- rather than simply hide in lockdown mode -- if their schools face an active violent threat such as a shooter.



More