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Elings Park to Honor Jerry Harwin

updated: Mar 01, 2011, 9:55 AM

By Steve Fox

What is now the largest privately funded park in the country was Santa Barbara's closed dump when Jerry Harwin, then chairman of city's recreation committee, first saw it in the late 1960s. Two nights later he and his grandson camped out at the site.

"I slept there with my grandson - I've still got the sleeping bag that I slept in - and it was such a beautiful night," Harwin recalls. "You could almost reach up and grab the stars. It must have been in the 70's - it was gorgeous. The next night I dreamed of playing baseball there and that's what got me started."

Harwin, whose exemplary record of community service begins in the 1950s, organized a non-profit group to form what was then called Las Positas Park. He raised \$1.5 million from the Fleischmann Foundation to cover the dump with earth and then went looking for donations for individual facilities.

"You've got to have somebody willing to open up their mouth and ask," he said. "They (donors) don't come running to you. Well, I learned how to do that. I took them out to lunch at Harry's, took them out in my car to the old dump site, took them up to the top of the hill and let them look down. I'd say, 'What do you think?' They'd say, 'I know what you're going to ask, Jerry.'"

Harwin asked, and because he had already given so much to the community, he and the park foundation received. A network of friends, colleagues and supporters had been formed by Harwin's work for - among many others - St. Francis Hospital, PTA, UCSB Gauchos, Airport Commission, Recreation Commission, Youth Boxing, Youth Basketball, Athletic Commission, Ortega Park, Pershing Park, Palm Park, Lions, Elks ... the list goes on and on. Typically, Harwin gives most of the credit to others.

"So many wonderful people have been involved over the years, and we have wonderful people on the board today," he said. "Most wonderful of all has to be Marcia Constance. She has supported the park tenaciously for many years and has led by example, inspiring other to follow."

Another important supporter is Dr. Virgil Elings, for whom the park was renamed in the 1990s. Over the years, hundreds of volunteers also have supported the park, which has never received any taxpayer money.

"The park costs the city nothing, and it costs the county nothing," Harwin said. "The volunteers - they don't receive a dime but they spend hours and hours and hours. They love what they're doing, they love the park. Every member of the board loves the park. But we need more people to support Elings Park."

Although Harwin has supported many civic causes, it's clear that Elings Park holds a special place in his heart.

"It's Santa Barbara's jewel," he said. "I know we've got the harbor and beaches and mountains, but youth-wise, Elings Park is Santa Barbara's jewel." Why are young people so important to someone who's 99?

"They are going to be our future," he said. "The little guys are our future. I look at them and imagine in my mind what they're going to look like when they grow up. I used to love to go to the park and watch the kids play soccer. I would sit down with some of the soccer moms and we'd get to laughing. I love people, and I love working with children."

Looking back, Harwin has a ready answer to why he's been successful on the community projects he's undertaken.

"I found the right people," he said. "If you want to be successful, you need help. You have to be able to find the right people - and you need a little luck too." Knowing he may be asked to speak at the Elings Park Foundation's Chairman's Gala honoring him, Harwin has decided how to handle it. "All they'll get out of me is 'Thank You' because I would have to thank each and every person individually, and God forbid I should forget somebody." He's got a similar problem with a 100th birthday party his two sons are planning for him. Harwin was married twice, the second time to the widow of his identical twin, Lionel. But that's another story ... "My sons want to put on a 100th birthday party for me and they said they would have to limit it to 100 guests," he said. "I've made the list with all the names and there's 180 people on that list. I've got to cut it down to 100 and if you don't think I've got a problem ... there are so many people along the line and all these many years that have helped me and been a part of everything I've started."

As to the inevitable question of how you live to be 99, Harwin has another ready answer, which he delivers with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Wine, women and song, but not necessarily in that order," he said. "Women song and wine. I did everything wrong. I had three doctors who are gone, all of them vegetarians and they worked out three times a week at the Y and this and that. They told me, 'Jerry, you've got to eat more fruits and vegetables.' But I'm

strictly a meat and potato man. They're gone and I'm still here. How come? Well, I'm a true optimist all the way. Just like this depression and everything. We're eventually going to be all right. Somebody's sick - he'll get through it. Just know you're going to get through it and you'll get through it. I've had a wonderful time, and I've enjoyed every minute of it."


