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Klyde Warren Park opens to crowds, sunshine in Dallas

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Tracy Halliday (right) played a game of table tennis against her 14-year-old son, Stephen Halliday, during opening ceremonies at Klyde Warren Park on Saturday.

After a decade in which she helped plan, fundraise and cajole Klyde Warren Park into existence, Linda Owen sat on the dais Saturday at the park's dedication, thinking about electrical wiring.

"We installed all that years ago, when the deck was just being built, and we didn't exactly know where the pavilion was going in. I was sitting there thinking, 'Will the lights go up? Will the sound be OK?'" she said.

Sound, lighting and speeches went off without a hitch, and so, to all appearances, did the opening of the long-awaited deck park over Woodall Rodgers Freeway.

The 5.2-acre, \$100 million amenity is not just a park, but a new kind of park. One that Owen has said she hopes will become Dallas' town square.

When the metal barriers were removed from park entrances at 9 a.m., attendance was initially sparse because of the chilly weather and a maze of blockaded streets that were closed to accommodate a half marathon.

By late morning, though, crowds began building. About midafternoon, the previously pedestrian-barren section of the city's center was as crowded as the midway at the State Fair.

Supporters of the park are hoping up to 40,000 people attend the opening weekend, which included a Saturday night concert and fireworks. Activities will conclude Sunday with a showing of the film *Midnight in Paris*, hosted by actor and Dallas native Owen Wilson.

At the opening ceremonies, Mayor Mike Rawlings expressed the wish that the park "will be a hub of activity for this and future generations."

"I've said we need to dial up the fun, and this is the headquarters for it," he said.

Speakers repeatedly noted the park's role as a bridge intended to physically and psychologically span the concrete moat of Woodall Rodgers Freeway, connecting a booming Uptown with a still-struggling downtown.

To make that point, the traditional ribbon-cutting was replaced by a ceremony in which two white ribbons were tied to an acrylic Klyde Warren Park logo.

As political and business dignitaries held the ribbons, the logo was hoisted by the 10-year-old fourth-grader for whom the park is named.

Moments after the ceremony ended, red-haired Klyde Warren was surrounded by a media scrum.

Standing next to his father, energy entrepreneur Kelcy Warren, Klyde mostly just smiled and gave quiet, polite and sometimes monosyllabic answers.

What was it like having his name mentioned by so many important people?

“It was cool,” he said.

He added that he was looking forward to playing in the park and — sounding a tad less enthusiastic — helping to maintain it, a condition of his father’s reported \$10 million donation.

“He’s a smart kid,” Kelcy Warren said. “I told him that because of this park, more people in Dallas are going to know his name than my name. You know what he said? He said, ‘That’s known as a head start, Dad.’”

After the official ceremonies ended, the verdict on the park was left to ordinary residents who were getting their first look at a venue many had been hearing about for years.

There was some unhappiness that the closure of adjacent streets meant parking blocks away. But most gave Dallas’ newest amenity high marks.

“There is so much going on here,” David Campbell of Grand Prairie said as he sat on the Great Lawn while his granddaughter got her face painted. “You can play chess if you want to. People are walking their dogs. I’m loving the music.”

Amid the bustle, Kyle Delp relaxed by reading a newspaper and taking in the scene.

“This is going to bring everyone back downtown,” said Delp, who manages several medical clinics. “There’s something for everybody.”

Delp, who lives in the West End, walked to the park with his Italian greyhound, Sydney. He said the park would build upon other efforts, such as Belo Garden, to provide outdoor space for downtown dwellers.

And he hoped it would inspire other developers in Dallas to think about ways to create spaces the public can interact with.

“This is the beginning of the walkability of Dallas,” he said.

Among those watching the proceedings with a professional eye was Dan Biederman, who two decades ago redeveloped Bryant Park in New York City, converting it from a drug haven to one of the nation’s urban jewels.

Biederman, who served as a consultant on Klyde Warren Park, noted that visitors were playing chess and croquet and making use of the putting green. This is a good early sign of success, he said — people who dropped by the park out of curiosity were becoming participants.

“I’m a little envious,” he said. “The first day we reopened Bryant Park, there were some things that weren’t as good as this.”

Among the most popular spots was the Children’s Park, where Mauricio Navarro watched his 3-year-old daughter, Vienna, make friends.

He has lived in downtown Dallas for years and has endured the same question over and over from his friends and family: Why?

“It’s finally getting to the point of not having to answer that question,” Navarro said.

Saturday’s crowd seemed about evenly divided between suburbanites and residents of close-in neighborhoods.

Tracy Halliday and her 14-year-old son, Steve, drove from Coppell. They strolled the commons and played a game of pingpong. Tracy even suggested that her son complete the urban experience by riding a DART train to Uptown to meet friends.

“Nobody comes downtown anymore,” she said. “This is a place for people to come and be together.”

Only one thing was missing, she said.

"What I want to know is, where is Owen Wilson?"

Staff writers Tom Benning and Nanette Light contributed to this report.