



## Bennett Family Park Phase II

Before I begin this history, let me explain that I have refrained from using names and dollars except where it is necessary to tell the story. Many dedicated people contributed time and money to the successful completion of Phase II, and I do not wish to single out or risk omitting anyone. As is customary, I have listed, at the end of this narrative, the names of the Bennett Family Park Board members who served during the transformation. I want to thank Bob Jasper for his help with the content of this report.

The Phase II story of Bennett Family Park is the story of cooperation, making our community a better place to live, and miracles. Bennett has offered a traditional baseball and softball venue since 1956. In 2004, several events converged and changed the landscape for youth baseball and softball in our community. The principal organizations driving these events were the : (i) Minnetonka Diamond Club (MDC), (ii) Minnetonka School District, (iii) Minnetonka Girls Softball Association (MGSA), (iv) Tonka Babe Ruth League, (v) City of Minnetonka, (vi) Miracle League, (vii) Hennepin County, and (viii) at the center the Bennett Family Park(BFP) and its Board.

In November of 2004, the BFP Board was approached about building a rubberized baseball field for physically and mentally impaired youth. Sam Ashkar, Tonka Babe Ruth President, invited Kevin Thoresen to talk to the BFP Board about constructing such a field. Kevin was traveling the country with a mission to convince communities to build these types of fields so that impaired youth could enjoy the benefits of playing ball.

Kevin was persuasive and the BFP Board decided that it would look into it. There were many questions that had to be answered before the BFP Board could commit. Where could everything go, was the most crucial question. How could it all be paid for, was the next big problem. It was suggested that the cost would be



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in the neighborhood of \$200,000. All sorts of plans were looked at. The thought of converting field 5 into a specialized field was one idea. Another idea involved making use of all the land that defines BFP and carve out an additional field in the back woods of the park. After lots of thought and what-ifs and meetings of all kinds, an idea started to form. It was just a germ of an idea. Was it possible? The BFP Board was determined to find out.

Other events entered into the deliberations. Some were fortuitous while some complicated the matter.

The City of Minnetonka identified a need for a baseball field to be used exclusively by 13 year olds. This was because the Babe Ruth Field, which had 90 foot base paths, was too long. The young players needed a field with 75 foot base paths. The BFP Board now had another demand for scarce space. The big question got bigger as did the question of how to pay for everything.

In the fall of 2004 the newly formed Minnetonka Diamond Club began formulating plans to build what would eventually become Veterans Field at Minnetonka High School. This was a cooperative effort, between the community and the Minnetonka School District, to improve the playing facilities for the Minnetonka High School baseball teams and the Minnetonka Millers (Minnetonka's own amateur baseball team). One idea to help solve BFP's space constraints was to explore working with the MDC to move a portion of the Minnetonka Girls Softball Association program from BP to the High School. The idea was pursued. Through negotiations between Jon Guy, MDC president and Jeff Bailey, MGSA president, an agreement was forged that expanded the Veteran's Field project to include new softball fields. The fields were built and are known as the Legacy Fields.



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This was a good solution for many reasons. Without the MGSA move the only location for the Miracle League Field was back around field 5. This was troubling to the BFP Board because it kept the children out of the mainstream. Isolating them rather than including them. With MGSA moving to the High School facility, field 3A was a logical location for the Miracle League Field. It would be centrally located, so that everyone at the park would have the opportunity to watch the games. The Miracle Leaguers would feel part of the whole picture.

The BFP Board now had a plan to address the question of where to put everything. It was then time to address the next big question. How to pay for it?

The move created financial challenges for the MGSA. For MGSA to be able to move from BFP to the High School, they had to raise a down payment of \$160,000 against the proposed cost of \$1.2 million. A formidable problem! MGSA under the guidance of their president, Jeff Bailey, set about raising money.

Meanwhile, the BFP Board decided that this was a good time to aggressively address other needed upgrades and needs unrelated to the Miracle League project. The BFP Board started the "Miracle at Bennett" fund raiser. The goal was to raise \$1.2 million. The lead facility architect was John Williams Sr., a project manager for Opus Corporation. John brought crucial experience and knowledge to the project. Bob Jasper, Long Range Planning Director for the BFP Board, spearheaded the fund raising campaign. Nancy Countryman worked closely with Bob and was responsible for harvesting the generosity of many long-time Bennett supporters. Giovanni Orbita was invaluable in the drafting of the multiple project maps that made the concept visually available to everyone. Matt Schulenberg's contacts in the world of asphalt enabled us to get a shiny new parking lot. Hundreds of volunteers helped to sod field 5 and build the shorter retaining walls



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that grace the park landscape. The companies and persons who contributed financially are carved into the plaque on the side of the concession stand.

The MGSA organization was doing well on their fundraising, but not well enough. In the midst of all the activity, Hennepin County needed to acquire some Bennett property to accommodate the expansion of Highway 101. The County eventually agreed to pay Bennett Family Park for the land that is now the sidewalk and the wall. The BFP Board decided that \$50,000 of the money received from the County would be contributed to MGSA's goal of \$160,000 for their fields at High School. This put MGSA closer to the required down payment, but they were still short of the goal. Enter the Mark Steingas family, who donated a large sum of money and who were given naming rights to the softball fields. Mark and his family had been involved with MGSA and BFP for around 20 years. They turned over their naming rights to the fields to the MGSA softball community. The name "Legacy Fields" won for the fields currently used at the Minnetonka High School by the Fast Pitch and MGSA teams. MGSA didn't leave BFP entirely. Their T-ball and Machine Pitch (the old coach pitch group) still play Thursday night games at BFP.

The "Miracle at Bennett" project included an upgrade of field 5 and several major improvements to the park facilities. The City of Minnetonka helped fund the improvements to field 5 by providing a \$50,000 grant. Field 5 became a field for 13 year olds as well as serving as a viable field for the East Tonka Little League (ETLL). The Babe Ruth field (field 1) was upgraded. Fields 2 and 4 were fixed up for the ETLL group and an additional field was built in the space between field 3B and 3C. This became field 3D. In 2010 it was named the "Nancy Countryman" field, in recognition of her more than 50 years of service to BFP, its various leagues and untiring dedication to and management of the Concession Stand. What was field 3A was transformed into the Subway Restaurants Harmon Killebrew Field. Former Minnesota Twins great, Harmon Killebrew, was a huge



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promoter of the “Miracle Field” concept and worked tirelessly to help raise money for these fields around the country. A new equipment shed was built to replace the old structure, which was torn down at the behest of the City of Minnetonka. Bennett got a new asphalt parking lot. You could now wash your car in the morning, come to Bennett and still have a clean car!

As part of this project, BFP tried to get lights installed, but too many neighbors fought vehemently against those lights at City meetings. BFP decided that in the interest of goodwill, it was prudent to drop that as part of this project.

The project was completed in 2009. The dedication was held on May 30, 2009. The day included the attendance of several local celebrities acting as “buddies” for a Miracle League game. Harmon Killebrew and Tony Oliva were the favorite buddies for the fans and kids alike.

In 2012, the Miracle League had 10 registered teams. Over 1,000 kids and adults volunteered to act as “buddies” to the team athletes and help them play their game.

But what about the “miracle”? The miracle is that so many people, the City of Minnetonka, and companies opened their hearts and their wallets to help with this project at Bennett. The miracle is that the Diamond Club and the Minnetonka School District were willing to listen to expanding their original dream and include the fields for the softball groups in our community. The biggest miracle is that all youth get to play the great game of baseball and that all sorts of people get to be their “buddies” to make it all happen.

You can find out more about the Miracle League by visiting their website at [www.westmetromiracleleague.org](http://www.westmetromiracleleague.org).



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**Minnetonka celebrates Bennett Family Park renovation completion**

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YKmPQNzl\\_1g](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YKmPQNzl_1g)



Minnesota Twins greats, Harmon Killebrew and Tony Oliva at the Subway Restaurants Harmon Killebrew field dedication event on May 30, 2009.



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Minnesota Twins great Tony Oliva at the Subway Restaurants Harmon Killebrew field dedication event on May 30, 2009.



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Sue, the Minnesota Twins organist, played the organ for us during the Miracle League game on May 30, 2009.



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This is a listing of all the Bennett Family Park Board members from 2005 until the end of project in 2009.

David Kordonowy-BFP President 2004 - 2005

Bob Lietzke-BFP President 2005 - 2013

Nancy Countryman-BFP Vice President

Gary Cayo-BFP Treasurer

Tricia Fairchild-Maddox-BFP Treasurer

Catherine Mellon-BFP Secretary

Karen Kasid-BFP Secretary

Giovanni Orbita-BFP Director

Bob Jasper-BFP Director

Jerry Kidd-BFP Field Crew Manager

John Williams Jr.-BFP Field Crew Manager

Chris Gabler-BFP Director

Mark Magney-BFP Director

Mark Risinger-BFP Director

Bill Hickey-BFP Director

John Williams Sr.-BFP Director

Sam Ashkar-TBR-BFP Director

John Flynn-TBR-BFP Director

Tim Tobin-TBR-BFP Director

Chris Wold-TBR-BFP Director

Benno Sand-TBR-BFP Director

Jeff Bailey-MGSA-BFP Director

Denise Swanson-MGSA-BFP Director

Rich Baker-MGSA-BFP Director

Mike Prochno-ETLL-BFP Director

Dan Hunt-ETLL-BFP Director

Mark Werley-ETLL-BFP Director

Matt Schulerberg-ETLL-BFP Director

Dave Wietecha-ETLL-BFP Director

Lisa Adzick-WMML-BFP Director

Bob Baldwin-BFP Director

Anita Kordonowy-BFP Bennett Book Editor

Brad Wiersam-City of Minnetonka

Companies and persons who donated materials and money for the project completion are listed on the plaque on the west side of the concession stand at Bennett. It is a beautiful memorial to all who gave to the project completion. It was designed and installed by Shelby Manion.

Submitted by

Robert Lietzke

President

Bennett Family Park Board of Directors 2005-2013