

Jesse Owens Memorial Park

Who would have ever thought that the son of a black Alabama sharecropper would win four Olympic Gold Medals in 1936 challenging Hitler's Aryan supremacy theory literally before the dictator's eyes? And who would have ever thought that sixty years later, June 29, 1996, the eyes of the world would focus back to Owens' Lawrence County birthplace to a \$2 million Alabama Cooperative Extension System rural development project?

The unlikely story of Extension's involvement in the park development began in 1990 when a resident of Oakville visited the Lawrence County Extension office to seek help. The 18-acre cow pasture that had been the site of the home where Jesse Owens was born had been purchased. He did not know the county Extension coordinator, but had a dream to share with someone who

might have the resources to turn that dream into a reality. This dream was of a park in the memory of Jesse Owens.

However, this nontraditional project, which was taken on by local agents, required that they plow new ground and challenge their resourcefulness. For the next 6 years the local Extension office became the center of activity in promoting and developing the park.

First, a community survey was done to get public input. The results of this survey aided local Extension agents and personnel at Auburn University to prepare a park development plan in 1991. This 10-year plan stated the purpose of the park, facilities to be included in the park, and amount of funding needed to build the park.

In 1993, Extension secured the help of Auburn University School of Architecture in developing a scale model of the park. This aided in securing sponsors and gaining media attention across the state. Lawrence County Extension agents traveled to Chicago to meet with the widow and family of Jesse Owens. The family pledged their support after viewing the model, seeing the plan, and becoming aware of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System's support. During the next 5 years, Extension agents met vigorously and continuously with corporate representatives, local and state public officials, and individuals in positions to give moral and financial support.

In October 1994, funding of \$174,000 made possible the commissioning of the \$80,000 bronze statue of Owens, the building of tennis and basketball courts, and the preliminary site preparation. Interest in the park was steadily growing, and park development was on schedule according to the 10-year plan.

However, as a result of an October 1994 fund-raising luncheon, the project timeline was catapulted to a frenzied pace. One hundred interested leaders attended this luncheon, including the Alabama governor and Fourth District United States Congressman. The keynote speaker, Dr. Leroy Walker, talked with Lawrence County Extension agents and community leaders. Dr. Walker, a personal friend of Owens and president of the United States Olympic Committee, was quickly impressed with the project. He committed that day to use his influence to get the Olympic Torch Run



reouted through Oakville. In July, 1995, Extension and community leaders learned that the Olympic torch would travel through Jesse Owens Park. Now, the race was on!

Overnight, the task was to accomplish in 11 months what had been expected to take 5 years. Additionally, funding of more than one million dollars would be needed. Extension and park leaders were also now confronted with the task of planning and funding the park dedication and torch visit. Appeals immediately went out to business people, corporations, elected officials, and volunteers to become involved. Intense media attention from across the nation focused on the Extension office. Extension involvement with park development and the torch visit were noted in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Miami Herald*, *Atlanta Journal*, *New York Times*, *Track & Field Magazine*, and other publications nationwide.

The Extension office became the focal point of all activities and media contacts. In just 6 months, \$1.3 million in funds were secured through grants, businesses, corporations, community organizations, churches, and individual contributions. Despite skepticism, Extension and the local community leaders were able to organize and coordinate use of those funds

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ACtion ALABAMA COMMUNITIES IN TRANSITION

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so that everything miraculously came together by the June 29 Torch Relay visit.

An 1896 tenant house was restored for use as a visitor's center. An early 1900's sharecropper home was located, purchased, moved 10 miles, restored and furnished. It serves as Owens' childhood home replica. Funding and volunteers came together to build a softball field complex. Four picnic pavilions and restrooms went up. A 3,600 square foot museum was built with landscaping and sidewalks. The underground electrical supply and water and sewage systems were put in place. The 14-foot statue and 1936 Olympic Torch Replica burning an eternal flame were completed. Parking lots and paving added the finishing touches.

The Extension Communications Department played a critical role working with the press to publicize the Torch celebration. Periodic visits were made to Oakville, documenting through video and photographs park progress as well as the events of June 29, 1996. A documentary was produced which continues to promote the park and inform visitors. A comprehensive memorial program was

developed and sold that day and served as a souvenir of this once-in-a-lifetime event.

Extension secured funding for 18 Owens family members to fly from all parts of the United States for the park dedication, the statue unveiling, and torch relay. Besides the logistics of making travel arrangements, Extension coordinated and planned the family's 3-day itinerary. The Atlanta Olympic Committee allowed Owens's 29-year-old grandson, Owen Rankin, to bear the Olympic Torch into the park. This proved to be a chilling event to the thousands present as Rankin sprinted up the winding hill giving a passing salute with the Olympic flame to the 14-foot bronze statue of his grandfather. The thousands present immediately broke out in boisterous cheers while waving American flags.

Future plans for the park include: the completion of the interior of the museum exhibit area; internet access to allow worldwide communications with the museum; a Volunteers in the Park (VIP) program to provide training for future guides through the park; a volunteer guide book and promotional literature; and funding for a corporate pavilion and an Olympic size track. Extension plans

are for a 1-year demonstration of operating, maintaining, and promoting the park, after which the park should be self-sustaining.

Local and state Extension professionals, in cooperation with local leaders, were successful in creating a unique cultural, educational, and recreational area for the community and state, as well as coordinating a major Olympic event. National and international attention on this project revealed the impact Extension makes.

The story of Jesse Owens and the story of the development of the Jesse Owens Memorial Park are both stories of triumph. They are stories of the triumph of individuals with vision, determination, and perseverance in the face of tremendous odds and adversity. As Jesse Owens's widow, Ruth, stated during the June 29 ceremony, "Jesse is up there looking at us now.... He would be proud."

James Pinion
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