

Owens Park gets boost

National chain sees park, museum potential

By Luke Slaton
Editor

International track champion Jesse Owens' three daughters watched Thursday as volunteer and contract workers scurried over the park that bears their father's name.

They returned to the town of their father's birth to witness the revitalization of the park and museum that honors his memory.

The project was part of Hampton Inns' Save-a-Landmark program, which furnished volunteers from the company along with a check for over \$38,000 to cover landscaping, cleaning and painting at the park and museum.

"This means so much to my family," said Beverly Owens Prather, the track great's daughter who, like her sisters, lives in Chicago. "If everyone could carry Daddy's attitude, the world would be a better place to live."

There were about 20 Hampton Inn employees who volunteered labor for the project. While most were from Hampton Inn hotels in surrounding counties, several were from places as far away as Memphis and California.



Advertiser photo by Luke Slaton

Sculptor Branko Medenica, second from right, explains the process of cleaning the Jesse Owens monument to the athlete's daughters Thursday. They are, from left, Gloria Hemphill, Beverly Prather and Marlene Rankin. At right is James Pinion.

They were spreading mulch, planting trees and shrubs, painting, pressure-washing sidewalks and walls and cleaning and polishing the bronze statue of Owens that overlooks the park.

The project came about after one of the sisters, Marlene Owens Rankin, contacted James Pinion about the Save-A-Landmark program. Rankin heads the Owens family foundation.

Pinion, a retired county agent coordinator with the Alabama

Cooperative Extension Service, has worked with the park and museum on a volunteer basis since its conception.

He is currently treasurer for the newly reorganized Jesse Owens Park board.

"I prepared a list of the things that needed doing and I included everything I could think of," he explained. "I sent in the application, and they approved everything I asked for."

The money went to pay for

contractors who did much of the work and supplied plants and materials. The volunteers filled in with labor to finish the individual projects at the park.

They were at the site Wednesday and Thursday of last week.

Branko Medenica, the Birmingham sculptor who produced the statue of Owens, was on hand to oversee the cleaning and polishing of the bronze statue.

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Medenica's statue captured the more-than-lifefize figure of a young Owens sprinting, with the five interlocking circles of the Olympic rings in front.

Owens won fame in the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, winning four gold medals for the United States and embarrassing German Chancellor Adolph Hitler, who had been promoting Aryan supremacy.

Owens was born in the Oakville community, just a few hundred yards from the park that bears his name.

When he was a child, he moved with his family to Cleveland, Ohio and he was eventually a track star at Ohio State University as well as at the Olympics.

In a ceremony when the checks were presented, each of Owens' daughters spoke briefly.

Rankin said her father's legacy is honored by the work being done at the park and museum.

Hemphill had praise for Pinion and for Therman White, a community volunteer who has worked at the park a lot over the years.

"James and Therman are like

part of the family to us," Hemphill said.

Pinion recalled the effort to reroute the path of the Olympic torch that lit the flame at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta.

"This park was still just concept at the time," he said. The route had already been finalized and was due to pass through Huntsville on its way to Atlanta.

However, Pinion appealed to Olympic officials and the route was modified to pass through the property that now is the park. Many local residents were chosen to carry the torch for parts of its journey to the park.

Chip Gregson, chief operating officer of the U.S. Olympic Committee, was at the ceremony Thursday at the park. He said Owens' contributions to the world went much farther than his jumping and running.

Bonnie Cameron of Memphis, one of the Hampton Inn volunteers on the project, said the Save-A-Landmark organization was specifically looking for a project with Olympic connections, since Hampton Inns recently became a sponsor of the U.S.O.C.

"This was a perfect fit," she said.

Hampton Inns is part of the Hilton hotel chain.



Chrissy Wadsworth, left, and Tammy Reist help paint the visitor's center at the entrance to the Jesse Owens Park. Wadsworth works at Hampton Inn in Madison, and Reist, a Lawrence County resident, works at the Decatur Hampton