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Spring 2020

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WSP In The Time Of Coronavirus

In any other year, a springtime walk through Washington Square Park is a busy affair. The pathways are teeming with people strolling and jogging through the Park. The lawns are dotted with picnic blankets and babies playing on the grass. Around every corner is something new and beautiful and blooming, and the iPhones are out in full-force to get the perfect Instagram picture.

But not this year.



The Park is less crowded, even on a beautiful spring day

The signs of spring are the same: tree branches laden with blossoms; leaves and grass turning green; daffodils and crocuses bursting up through the ground. The weather is warm and beautiful. It's the people that have changed; living a new normal due to a global pandemic that has altered the entire landscape of our lives. Where folks once crowded to take close-ups of the cherry trees and gather with friends, there are now only squirrels and birds. "It almost reminds me of the city after 9/11," says Peter, a local Dad. "It's the same kind of silence, that feeling of everyone holding their breath. It's been a bit of a ghost town, to be honest."

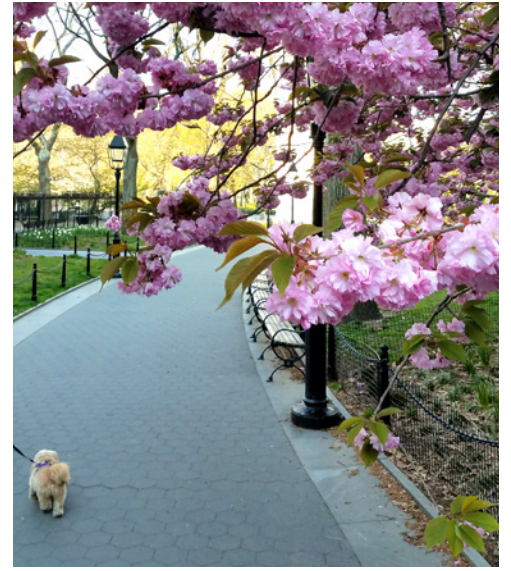
For those still venturing outside, Washington Square Park has become an essential refuge. As long as people stay six feet apart, being outside isn't just safe, it's necessary. "Before the runs closed, taking Nala [the dog] there was the highlight

of my day," says Village local, Michael. "I understand why they're closed now, but it was a blow. We'll have to settle for lots of long walks instead, at least we can still do that." Everyone is figuring out their new routines, finding ways to stay sane during such an insane time. Like Peter and his son Pablo, who have turned their occasional spontaneous trip to the Park into a daily, nearly sacred, routine. "We try to go first thing in the morning, almost like we're walking to school. It's so uplifting to see the Park in bloom, like a reminder that not everything is bad," says Peter. It's a sentiment echoed around the neighborhood and across social media, "Washington Square Park is my sanity." As it has been since its start, the Park is still the heart of the neighborhood. What little life is still going on, is happening here.

As Washington Square Park Gardener, Dwayne, says, "the show goes on." And he would know. The staff at the Park is designated essential, so the whole team has continued to work hard as the PAUSE has gripped our city. They've been working safely, wearing protective gear provided by NYC Parks, and some homemade masks crafted and donated by the Conservancy's own Communications Manager, Grace. "It hasn't been easy, but I think it's good that we're here," says Youth Activities Coordinator, Miss Debbie. "There's something about us



Parkies take a socially-distanced stroll
Photo by Malcolm Rltter



Passing under the Kwanzan cherry blossoms

sticking to our routine that I think makes people feel better. We're a reminder that there's still some normalcy at the Park." Whether it's Donald pressure washing or the gardeners tending the beds, the Park's needs haven't changed. Thanks to the staff, as we slowly begin to return to normal, there won't be any catching up to do. Even the playgrounds are being swept clear of debris, "so it doesn't look sad and desolate," says Miss Debbie.

This has been an undeniably difficult time for our country, and our city. But there's something about the squirrels still playing, the birds still chirping, the flowers still blooming, that helps us remember that this, too, shall pass. "Being away from the Park for this long is hard, especially in springtime when the new volunteering season is supposed to start," says WSPC Greeter, Emily. "I miss being out there with the Welcome Wagon talking to people. Washington Square Park is a special place, it's impossible to be there and not feel connected to everyone around you. We're going to need that when this is all done, and it's comforting to know it will be there."

While everything else may be uncertain, Emily is right. One thing we know for sure is that at the end of all of this, Washington Square Park will still be there, waiting for us.

A Day In The Life Of A WSP Family

It's a beautiful, sunny summer Wednesday morning on 9th Street in Greenwich Village; pre-pandemic. As has become their routine, Melissa (aka Mom) and Dylan are walking Hayley to day camp. It's a bit before 9AM so the summer heat hasn't had a chance to bake the pavement yet, and there's still a hint of early morning coolness lingering in the shade under trees and building awnings. Hayley is excitedly chatting to Mom about what she's looking forward to at camp that day, and asking if they can have ice cream as a treat later. Dylan is quiet, observing the world roll by him from his vantage point in the stroller, occasionally pointing at an insect or small animal and excitedly exclaiming, "BEE!" whether it is or not. It's the new favorite word in his limited vocabulary, recently picked up during a Pollinator Party in the Park where the kids learned about how bees help flowers.

Once Hayley is at camp, Mom and Dylan turn their sights towards Washington Square Park. With a stroller fully stocked with trucks, sand toys, and snacks, Dylan is ready to spend the lazy summer hours bouncing between the Play Hills, playgrounds, and lawns. The kids can entertain themselves for hours playing in the Park, with friends or just by themselves. It's the best, most interesting backyard in the world, and the only one they've ever really known; an essential and beloved part of their little world.



Dylan and Hayley make fast friends with Miss Debbie

But the Park was part of the family long before Dylan, or even Hayley, was in the picture. Mom and Dad have been visiting the Park since they were still just Melissa and David; a young couple living on the second floor of a small building, facing the Park. They would fall asleep to the sounds of NYU students' weekend revels, and wake up to strains of music. Every day they would find their way to a bench with a picnic to watch the multitudes of people that pass through Arch plaza.

Now the snacks are more string cheese and goldfish than brie and crackers, but the family's ties to the Park have only grown stronger. Dylan and Hayley practically live there when the weather allows it, roaming freely through their kingdom. Each day brings something new: sometimes there's yoga, sometimes fun learning opportunities about pollinators, sometimes a chance to play music, and other days are just filled with friends and running around. But today is special. Since it's Wednesday, that means there's *Art in the Park* with Miss Debbie in the afternoon—a family favorite.

After a morning of playing with friends (mostly human, some furry), Mom and Dylan leave the Park just long enough to scoop up Hayley and head back to see what Miss Debbie has in store. Entertaining the kids for so long outside used to be kind of daunting for Mom; they'd show up to the Park without much purpose or plan of what to do, and keeping them engaged was a formidable task. But that's quickly changed since meeting Miss Debbie, WSP's Youth Activity Coordinator. Ever since their first chance encounter, involving bouncy balls and some tambourines, Miss Debbie has provided a structure and growing community that Mom has found essential. Thanks to Deb, many afternoons are now spent meeting in the Northwest corner of the Park or the Play Hills for a fun activity. There are familiar faces, new friends that the kids and Mom have met while out playing with Miss Debbie. It's been a lifeline for Melissa, who was struggling to find a new group ever since college friends moved away. She sits and chats with Miss Debbie and the other moms and



The whole family enjoys their time in WSP



Dylan and Hayley get creative during Art in the Park

nannies while the kids get glitter glue all over everything in the process of making new art to hang on the fridge.

With hands covered in paint and glitter, and eyelids starting to droop, Mom realizes it's time to call it a day. As they pack up, Dylan and Hayley can't stop talking about all the fun they had, clutching their new masterpieces close as they walk home. And of course, since Mom promised earlier this morning, there's a stop for ice cream.



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The Pandemic Can't Stop These Community Arts Grantees

Spring is a time of new growth, and new beginnings. In Washington Square Park, it's also when in-Park programs start up again, filling the days (and Park!) with music, dancing, and laughter. Since 2016, WSPC has provided funding in the form of small grants—between \$500–\$2,000—to help support community organizations and local arts groups who have built a strong relationship with the Park and Village neighbors. To date, the Conservancy has provided \$40,000 in funding since the inauguration of the program in 2016.

This season is going to be undeniably different from previous years. Due to social distancing restrictions, some Park favorites that have been around for years may not make it outside—like the Washington Square Music Festival, which would have celebrated its 62nd year in June. But that doesn't make these organizations any less essential, or any less a part of the fabric of Washington Square Park. Therefore, WSPC has committed to funding our Community Arts Grants program, regardless of grantees' ability to program in the Park this season. Where possible, organizations have been encouraged to create online content that Park users can enjoy at home.

"It will be a new normal," says Leslie Davol, Co-Founder and Executive Director of Street Lab, a WSPC Community Arts grantee organization which creates engaging programs for public spaces. "Our mission is to bring people together in their communities. That's going to have to look different, since social distancing will likely continue even after the quarantine lifts. But our programs are going to be more essential than ever, people are really craving that human connection we help foster." The important thing is to keep looking forward to the time when we can all be back outside together. While groups like the Washington Square Music Festival and Films on the Green won't be in the Park this season, WSPC's commitment helps ensure these beloved programs return to the Park in future.



*A stirring performance by Theater for the New City, Summer 2019
Photo by John Eng*




*Street Lab: DRAW NYC attracts budding artists to the NW corner, Fall 2019
Photo courtesy of Street Lab*



*An annual Square Dance closes out the festivities of the Washington Square Park Folk Festival, Summer 2019
Photo by Malcolm Ritter*

The Washington Square Park Conservancy (WSPC) is a 501(c)(3) not for profit organization formed to help keep Washington Square Park clean, safe and beautiful. WSPC works with the New York City Parks Department and neighborhood groups to ensure that the Park continues as a diverse and historical urban green space by raising funds and engaging volunteers.

PO BOX 1624 Cooper Station, New York NY 10276

 hello@washingtonsquareparkconservancy.org

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