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North Slope park will honor essence of Valerie Sivinski

The little park at North Eighth and K Street in Tacoma is bound to be known by more than one name.

Its official name is the North Slope Historic District Park. But once it is dedicated to the memory of Valerie Sivinski next month, it likely will be known simply as "Val's Park."

The little place will have more than one name because it needs to tell so many stories.

First is the story of a neighborhood desperate to keep its single-family character. Those who lived in its century-old homes watched house after house be demolished for cheap apartment buildings.

"We were lost here," said Julie Turner, who lived on North J Street.

Next comes the story of a young architect with a passion for history. Valerie Sivinski moved to Tacoma with husband Tim McDonald in 1988 to become the city's historic preservation officer.

These two story lines started to intertwine in 1993, when Sivinski was approached by the desperate J Street neighbors. McDonald remembers that he and Valerie had just been to Providence, R.I., and toured homes in a residential historic district. That was her inspiration to suggest that the neighbors try to create a historic district – a move that would protect the houses from demolition.

They started with a modest goal of six blocks along J Street. But when adjacent owners heard about the drive, they wanted in, too. By then encompassing 100 structures, the district won City Council approval in 1995. Phase II increased the protected houses to 500 in 1997. Phase III increased the size to 850 in 2000. What is now called the North Slope Historic District – running roughly from the north side of Division Avenue to St. Patrick Church – is the state's largest.

Owners must get approval from the Landmarks Commission when they make changes or improvements to the outside of a home. In return, they qualify for tax breaks. Property values have increased significantly.

Sivinski left City Hall and created a firm focusing on historic preservation architecture with her husband and another former preservation officer, Michael Sullivan.

The final story is about the park itself. When Tacoma Power declared the site of the former K Street Substation as surplus, resident Kelly Halligan had an idea. Why not turn it into a pocket park? Neighbors went to work persuading the North End Neighborhood Council to give some of the money it had for neighborhood improvements to the park. And because there are no places for small children to play, the park was envisioned with play equipment for toddlers.

Remaining on the back property line is a section of the cyclone fence that once kept people off the property. Still there are signs that read "K Street Substation" and "Keep Away DANGER High Voltage."

All of these stories will come together on June 8 when the park is dedicated to Sivinski, who died in an accident Oct. 17, 2000, at age 49. Tim McDonald will donate a marker made of the same Wilkeson and Tenino sandstone used on many of the state's most significant buildings. It will depict a stack of books on history, architecture and fairy tales – all from her library.

Neighbors think the park will become a gathering place for a neighborhood that turned to historic preservation as a tactic to stop apartments but grew to appreciate the heritage that these old houses represented.

"She helped us see the value of all the elements of the neighborhood, from the small modest cottage to the big showplace," wrote Roger Johnson, one of the founders of the district.

Said Turner: "When we dedicate the park, we're really dedicating the neighborhood to Valerie. She saved the neighborhood."

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