

DAVID SHAPIRO: Park is a revelation after residents clean it up

It took the initiative of a lone resident to knock the place into shape

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James and Ethel Gray Park. Picture SUNIL GENESESS



I love running through the James & Ethel Gray Park in Melrose, especially on a cold highveld winter's morning.

The sky is a rich blue, the air fresh and crispy. There is a steep climb from the bottom gate on Athol-Oaklands Road to a flat mound near the main entrance on North Street. I pause at the peak for a moment, puffing like a steam train, and look south towards the Witwatersrand, taking-in the glorious panorama. The view at sunrise is exquisite.

Until recently, this vast estate, tucked between the upper-class suburbs of Birdhaven and Melrose, was populated by vagrants, who set up home on the banks of a spruit that runs through the grounds, burning fires to keep warm and cook, and using the stream as a washroom and toilet. Unsettled by the prying stares of these



destitute people, and scared off by reports of muggings, robberies, and factional fighting, this alluring recreational area became a no-go zone. Litter collected, the grass grew long, and the undergrowth was left unkempt.

Today, the huge parkland is safely fenced and patrolled, 24 hours a day, by security guards. The grass is cut regularly, the forest scrub cleared, and the pedestrian paths constantly neatened. And the homeless have agreeably moved to another location. The space now teems with joggers, hikers, dog owners and families pushing young ones in prams. Acrobranch, the “Indiana Jones” adventure course, is flourishing, while a newly opened Padel Club, with an eating and drinking area and a children’s playground, has become an instant hit.

The transformation of this grassland and bird sanctuary was the initiative and passion of one man, Sunil Geness, though it’s impossible to imagine he could have

accomplished this mission single-handedly. I am certain that fencing company Clear-Vu and various ratepayer associations and concerned businesspeople have also contributed generously to the park's makeover.

I first encountered Sunil in the park a few years ago directing workers in a cleanup operation. He politely introduced himself, explaining that he owned an adjoining property, and, for the safety and enjoyment of the surrounding residents, he was undertaking a project to overhaul this prized property.





I was struck by his enthusiasm but believed, that in a country where maintaining public order and civil duty is merely a pastime pleasure of elected officials, the magnitude of this assignment would eventually fell him.

Where Sunil differed from the crowds of ranting and raving WhatsApp groups, YouTubers, and TikTokers demanding revamps and restorations, is that he put on a pair of overalls, filled his bakkie with picks and shovels and began turning the soil. He and his fellow workers have built their Field of Dreams. They created something that everyone wanted. Visit the James & Ethel Gray Park in Melrose any day of the week and you will see that the people have come.

On a map of Johannesburg, the park is a mere pinprick. But the more we prick the map with similarly inspired initiatives the more visible these small holes become. We live in a country where the people



...in a country where the people entrusted with our safety, education, health, and recreation are indolent, indifferent, unskilled, and grasping, and conceiving this will suddenly change in the near future is pure fantasy.

If we choose to remain in this country and build a better life, we will have to follow Sunil's example and rehabilitate our cities, road by road, block by block, suburb by suburb. Only with this effort and belief can we succeed.

- *Shapiro is chief global equity strategist at Sasfin Wealth.*