

Forest Heights Embraces Healthy Lifestyle

Prince George's Town Aims to Become 'Jewel of the Potomac'

Cathy Clark remembers Forest Heights as a typical Washington, D.C. suburb when she first moved to the small town in 1974 with her husband and two children.

As one of the first African-American families in the town, Clark, 69, remembers clean streets, neighbors knew each other, and a community willing to move beyond the color line.

"When I moved here the town was practically lily-white," she said. "There were a few issues we had to work out."

On Saturday, Aug. 3 the town celebrated its 64th anniversary with its annual Forest Heights Day, which featured healthy living themed activities and vendors. For the town, it was a celebration of its history and its efforts to reinvent itself as an environmentally friendly municipality in Prince George's County.

The town, one of the few in southern Prince George's County, largely ran smoothly until the 2000s when infighting became common between the town's mayor and its council. In 2005, the town's mayor was charged with two counts of assault and later tried to dissolve the town's charter. The following year, a new mayor took office but was later removed over suspicion that he misused funds from the town. The pattern more or less repeated itself until Mayor Jacqueline Goodall took office in 2011, becoming the first mayor since 2000 to serve a full term.

"We've had some struggles. We've had some growing pains," Goodall said. "Our goal is to move Forest Heights forward."

The town has revamped itself in recent years moving away from infighting to becoming an eco-friendly and livable community. Under Goodall's leadership, the town has installed a green roof on its municipal building, and renovated the building using recycled materials. The town has expanded its recycling program and is in the process of installing new roadways that incorporate bike lanes, sidewalks, and other transportation needs known as "complete streets."

Renovating a town doesn't come cheap. Goodall said that Forest Heights has secured nearly \$2 million in grant funding for the various projects over the last few years.

"The council began to work together," she said. "Forest Heights has definitely been perceived in a different light."

Residents, too, said they've moved forward and began to become more engaged in the town.

Karlee Maddox, 17, and her sister Carmin Maddox, 15, said they've lived in the town for about nine years and have increasingly become more active in community activities by volunteering.

"If the youth [don't] get involved then no one will," said Karlee.

Above all, town officials said they wanted to raise awareness about healthy living and obesity.

Within Prince George's County, which includes Forest Heights, 30 percent of adults are obese, according to the National Institute for Children's Healthcare Quality, a nonprofit organization based in Boston, that advocates on behalf of children to ensure better health care. By comparison, only 19 percent of adults in Montgomery County, another Maryland suburb, are obese.

"Our people are dying of obesity," said Charmaine Turner, 60, head of the town's Healthy Living Program. "People don't know they have to do something about this."

Still, town officials said residents have been receptive to the program and awareness is on the rise. Goodall said the town has definitely made progress but added that more work is needed.

"My dream is to see Forest Heights as the jewel of the Potomac [River] on the Maryland side," she said.

See original article as reported by Joshua Garner at:

<http://washingtoninformer.com/news/2013/aug/07/forest-heights-embraces-healthy-lifestyle/>