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MULTIMEDIA

“It’s a getaway from campus”: Howard Park offers opportunities to de-stress, explore South Bend

Maria Luisa Paul (<https://ndsmcobserver.com/author/mpaulrangel/>) | Tuesday, March 16, 2021

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Hailing from Birmingham, Michigan, senior Jenna Wade has ice skated ever since she was a toddler. As a college student, she is a member of the Notre Dame Figure Skating Club (<https://skating.nd.edu/>)'s intercollegiate team. An experienced skater, Wade found a way to inject her passion for ice skating into a fun outing with friends at Howard Park (<https://ndsmcobserver.com/2021/02/howardpark/>), South Bend's oldest park located near downtown, at 219 S. St. Louis Blvd.

While visiting the park's popular ice rink, which features an ice trail with varying levels of terrain and a ground-breaking stretch of skating over a bridge, Wade said she attempted to teach tricks to her friends — with varying degrees of success.

Besides learning how to do spins and spirals, Wade said the group discovered a way to cope with the mental health challenges (<https://ndsmcobserver.com/2020/11/our-mental-health-matters-students-struggle-with-mental-health-during-unusual-semester/>) and stress brought by a pandemic-ridden semester.

“I feel like it was like nice to get off campus to do something,” Wade said. “I personally really love skating because it makes me focus on other things besides COVID and school and stuff, because you have to focus on what you’re doing while skating.”



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Boasting 122 years of history, Howard Park was revamped in 2019 and now features an ice trail and a pond, a playground, a concession stand, an interactive series of water fountains, an event lawn for concerts, a community building and a newly-opened restaurant facility.

Its [\\$18 million renovation \(https://ndsmcobserver.com/2019/12/south-bends-howard-park-undergoes-18-million-renovation/\)](https://ndsmcobserver.com/2019/12/south-bends-howard-park-undergoes-18-million-renovation/) was funded through tax increment financing (TIF) bonds, park bonds and private donations. The project was part of a \$50 million investment into the city's park system, or the "single largest investment into parks in the history of South Bend," according to Jonathan Jones, the director of recreational experiences at the City of South Bend Venues, Parks and Art.

Since being renovated, the park has become a popular attraction. Jones said that last year alone, there were an estimated 300,000 visitors. He said one of Howard Park's most popular features is the [ice skating rink \(https://visithowardpark.com/ice-skating/\)](https://visithowardpark.com/ice-skating/), which brought in 30,000 skaters during the 2020 winter season, but will now be closed until November 2021.

For Wade, Howard Park represents an opportunity to venture outside the confines of Notre Dame's campus.

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“It’s a great way for the community to extend — it’s a great place,” she said. “It’s kind of a far walk from campus, but it’s like, close enough that students should definitely go more.”



Bursting the ‘Notre Dame bubble’

Armed with her newly-gained ice skating skills and rented hockey skates, senior Tatiana Perneti joined an impromptu race between a staff member and skating aficionado at Howard Park’s ice rink last Thursday. Some might call it FOMO — the fear of missing out — or an overestimation of her skills, but the Miami native said she was ready to take on her contenders.

Once the trio turned the corner, Perneti said her two opponents dashed forward, leaving her behind. At that point, she decided to drop out, tumbling down while at it, but not before being complimented on her efforts by another stranger.

Despite losing, Perneti said her ego remained unscarred — she proudly showed off two big purple bruises on her knees as “battle wounds.” The Notre Dame senior might not have emerged victorious, but she said she gained something greater than a trophy: a renewed sense of community.

“This guy came after I fell and picked me up. And he was

like, ‘But what you were doing before you fell was really cool,’” she said. “I felt like we were building community.”

Pernetti said she had decided to visit Howard Park with a group of friends as a way to burst the “Notre Dame bubble,” or students’ tendency to refrain from venturing away from campus.

“Every single time that I go out with my friends we always complain about how we never do things in South Bend, and it’s so nice every time we actually do,” she said.

The senior said there are plenty of misconceptions about South Bend, one of them being that it is a “doomed town” with limited activities. However, such notions were dispelled with her trip to Howard Park.

“At the end of the day, there are young people that live in South Bend, and they’re trying to have fun things to do during this pandemic,” Pernetti said. “There were just as many South Bend residents as there were Notre Dame students. I think this really builds a sense of community between Notre Dame students and South Bend citizens, and Notre Dame students should be a part of that because Notre Dame is such a big part of South Bend.”



Howard Park in the summer is a popular place to visit for South Bend locals as the city recently spent \$18 million in renovations.

Although the park attracts plenty of young people and students, Jones said Howard Park has become a melting pot of different ages and socioeconomic backgrounds.

“I think it’s been a huge asset to our community,” he said. “If you come down there on any given day, it’s just such a diverse crowd that is hanging out there. It really has become a great kind of unifying location for people of all ages, races, economic levels.”

Due to it possessing a centralized location within the city, Jones added that one of the goals behind the park’s renovation was to turn it into a community “connecting point.”

“We were very intentional about wanting to create a space that would attract people from all age ranges,” he said. “We wanted to make sure that it was equitable, and that everyone felt included in that sense. So we’ve tried to do that through design, programming and pricing of activities and amenities.”

With that objective in mind, the park offers a plethora of recreational opportunities (<https://ndsmcobserver.com/2021/02/howardpark/>) from ice skating and playgrounds to live music and fitness classes. Guests are also able to enjoy snacks and hot chocolate from the South Bend Chocolate Company Cafe Express, as well as wine and dine (<https://visithowardpark.com/food-drink/>) at Howard Park Public House.

Though the park already offers a wide range of activities, Jones said Howard Park’s staff is open to listening to insight and ideas about “fun, relevant and interesting” programming from the community.

“I can sit in my office and try to think of what those things are, but the more people that I have in my ear, giving insight, giving suggestions, offering their own expertise to kind of make some things happen — we’re open to that,”

Jones said. “So, if there’s anybody on campus that wants to help be a part of creating cool things in our community, we’re down to work with you.”

A ‘magical’ experience

Like Perneti, senior Liara Ortiz was seeking opportunities to venture outside of Notre Dame and participate in COVID-safe activities. Ortiz said Howard Park was on her bucket list.

“I’ve been wanting to explore South Bend more in my last semester as a student,” Ortiz said.



Courtesy of Liara Ortiz

Senior Liara Ortiz visited Howard Park’s popular ice rink.

During a chilly Sunday afternoon, Ortiz found a “getaway” within Howard Park as she ice skated with friends and drank hot chocolate by the fire pits. She said the park’s environment seemed to come out of a fairytale book.

“The ice rink was really nice. It is like a trail, and the trees are covered in Christmas lights,” she said. “It felt magical.”

Jones said the park’s “Instagram-worthy” aesthetics were an intentional goal behind the renovation. During planning meetings, the committee gauged “cool factors” and had a Pinterest board from different places. The group even toured Chicago’s Maggie Daley rink (<https://maggiedaleypark.com/things-to-do-see/skating-ribbon/>) and locations in Valparaiso, Indiana, for inspiration.

The end result was the creation of “a pretty cool vibe,” Jones said, that is not only captivating visitors into the park itself but also positively impacting neighboring businesses.

“An economic study saw that some of the surrounding businesses were even quoted as saying that they saw an uptick in business about 15% or so,” Jones said.

Surrounding the park at E. Jefferson Boulevard, visitors can enjoy a variety of food options for different occasions. The View Tavern (<https://theviewtavern.wordpress.com/menu-2/>) offers classic burgers and craft beer “with a neighborhood vibe.” At The General Deli and Cafe (<https://www.thegeneraldeli.com/>), patrons can enjoy a cup of locally-brewed coffee along a selection of sandwiches, soups and salads. Hammer and Quill (<https://www.thehammerandquill.com/>), a local bar, provides unique cocktails and different small plates.

After first visiting Howard Park, Perneti said she went to

both The General Deli and Cafe and Hammer and Quill, noting that their environment seemed “out from New York City.”

“The bathroom floor was made of pennies and there were paintings,” she said. “It was really cute and different. I wouldn’t expect something like that in South Bend.”

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