

O'Rourke playground

Move to rename Dyker IS schoolyard to honor victim of botched surgery

By Jotham Sederstrom
The Brooklyn Papers

The name of a Bay Ridge man whose death two years ago stemmed from brain damage he suffered as a child could grace the entrance of a playground in Dyker Heights if passed by the City Council.

It introduced by Councilman Vincent Gentile and passed, the playground at Dyker Heights Intermediate School would be renamed to honor Patrick O'Rourke, who died in December 2001. A botched surgery 23 years earlier had left him with severe brain damage.

"To those who might believe that Patrick O'Rourke does not deserve this honor, I would say they are misinformed," said state Sen. Marty Golden, who was first approached by Patrick's mother, Elaine O'Rourke, when he was a City Council member.

The resolution passed Community Board 10 in June, after some debate. According to John Quaglione, an aide to Golden, an argument initially arose because of a lawsuit that was brought by the O'Rourke family against Lutheran Medical Center in 1978. Because of a lack of monitoring equipment, which at the time was not standard in all hospitals, an operation to cure bedwetting left Patrick brain damaged and in a wheelchair.

"By honoring him they thought they'd be dishonoring the medical profession," said Quaglione. "But they've met with the family and they understand the issue."

But the move to rename the playground for O'Rourke ran

into two stumbling blocks — a CB10 moratorium on naming public property in honor of residents, which ran from June 2002 until April of this year, and a city Department of Parks and Recreation policy requiring a clear connection between the honoree and the park to be renamed.

Although Patrick played in the park as a boy, he wasn't a student at the middle school, which is at 8010 12th Ave.

Instead, said Harrison, CB10 decided that Patrick's illness, which in 1981 was reported by the television news magazine "20/20," helped ensure that the pulsometer system that monitors oxygen in water would be the rule in hospital emergency rooms nationwide, meeting CB10's new renaming criteria that during his experience he had affected change that would help others in the community.

Gentile spoke earlier this

month to Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe. According to Gentile aide Scott Gastel, the two agreed to move forward on the name change, which will likely be packaged with other name changes in a single piece of legislation sometime before the year's end.

"I had to call Gentile's office on Friday for a letter saying that it's definite," said Elaine O'Rourke. "Once I have that letter in my hand I'll feel very secure — but not until."

O'Rourke, a month shy of his 32nd birthday when he died, was 8 years old when the accident made him a quadriplegic. Before then, he played every day at the park, which was less than a block from the O'Rourke home. Now the family lives in Bay Ridge, but Elaine's daughter Christy, 30, still brings her son, Patrick Jr., to the park several times a week.



The O'Rourkes, Donald, Elaine, Patrick and Christy, in 1978 at Patrick's First Communion.

New manager for CB10

By Deborah Kolben
The Brooklyn Papers

Community Board 10 does little without a big fight, and choosing a district manager was no exception.

While the board voted in favor of hiring Josephine Beckmann, a longtime employee of former Park Slope Councilman Stephen DiBrenza, to the post, it was not clear the issue would make it that far as the Oct. 20 monthly board meeting at the Fort Hamilton Senior Center on Fort Hamilton Parkway and 99th Street.

According to board bylaws, a search committee is charged with selecting at least one applicant to present to the entire board.

At Monday night's closed executive committee meeting following the regular board meeting, board members voted down both of the committee's first- and second-choice picks in favor of Beckmann, who passed with an overwhelming majority.

Bay Ridge Councilman Vincent Gentile, who controls roughly half the appointments to the board, made it widely

known that he supported Beckmann. And DiBrenza was also on hand at Monday's meeting advocating for Beckmann, who worked for the councilman for 15 years.

At last month's board meeting, CB10 Chairman Stephen Harrison proposed changing the process to allow the search committee to present an order of preference and have the board vote down the line instead of putting all the candidates up for a vote at the same time.

Prior to Monday's vote, community board member Delia Schack made a motion for the board to vote on the voting process.

That motion was just narrowly shot down. Beckmann said she was excited for her new job. "It's something that I love to do," Beckmann said. "I love working with people, navigating through city agencies. I hope to get to meet all the groups in the CB10 area and work with them to get the city services that we're all entitled to."

Ridge streets named for Behler, English, DeMartini

By Deborah Kolben
The Brooklyn Papers

Residents may soon notice something different about a slew of Bay Ridge parks and streets.

Their names. Community Board 10 passed three applications for street and park renamings after Bay Ridge city leaders at its monthly meeting on Oct. 20 at the Fort Hamilton Senior Center at 9941 Fort Hamilton Parkway.

"These were people who made a difference. These were real leaders," said state Sen. Marty Golden, who got up to speak on behalf of the late Michael Behler, John DeMartini and Harry English.

The Shore Road Park lanelet opposite 9000 Shore Road will be named in honor of Behler, a longtime civic leader who championed the cleanup of the parks, formed the Bay Ridge Anti-Graffiti Group (BRAG), served as president of the 68th Precinct Community Council for 26 years, pioneered the borough's alternative sentencing program and acted as head

usher at St. Patrick's Church. In addition, Behler also served on Community Board 10. He was first appointed to the board in February 1986 and served until August 1990. He was reappointed in May 1997 and served as treasurer until his retirement from the board in June 2000.

District Attorney Charles Hynes, a longtime Bay Ridge resident, could not attend Monday's meeting but pledged his support for the renaming in a letter read by his son, Sean Hynes.

In the letter, Hynes described Behler as a man who was "delightful and full of life" and whose "absolute mission was to save the parks."

Behler, 71, died in 2000 after a two-year battle with lung cancer. "Thank you, all," said Behler's widow, Shirley Behler, who following the vote was embraced by Golden and a several emotional board members.

The board also approved an application to rename the corner of Sixth Avenue and 74th Street in honor of John DeMartini.

DeMartini left behind a legacy of community activism, as well as eight children and 16 grandchildren who he could often be seen pushing around the streets of Bay Ridge, friends said.

After working for more than 30 years as a history teacher at John Jay High School in Park Slope, DeMartini became a member of Community Board 10 in 1984, where he served as chairman for two years beginning in 1995.

Following his death in January 2001, for the next two months of board meetings, DeMartini's seat, the second chair in the first row, was kept vacant as a memorial to his work.

The street renaming will

serve as a more lasting tribute. DeMartini died at age 71 after battling leukemia for more than a year.

His widow, Mary DeMartini, and youngest son, Steven, attended Monday's meeting. Many of those who knew him addressed the board in support of renaming Third Avenue and 72nd Street "Harry English Way."

The most detailed tribute came from former CB10 district manager Mary Sceneppos who described English as "an extraordinarily effective community leader."

During the economical depression of the late 1970s, English devoted himself through his role as president of

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GERATY...

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Eileen Geraty argued that her daughter deserved the honor. Geraty was born and raised in Bay Ridge and attended PS 104 and the Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic High School. From an early age, Geraty volunteered at a camp for children with cancer and HIV. She was a longtime volunteer for the Special Olympics and worked at the Guild for Exceptional Children before taking a job at Cantor Fitzgerald.

Following Monday's meeting, Bay Ridge Councilman Vincent Gentile said he was pleased with the board's decision and glad that the works "9-11 Memorial Way" would be included on the signs. Gentile must now get the street naming request passed in the City Council, a formality, so that it can be signed into law by Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

"What we have to be better signage than it is was just the street naming," Gentile said.

Harrison said he was happy that the naming debate had come to an end.

"I'm pleased that we came to a resolution and I'm pleased that the people around us were pleased," Harrison said.

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FULTON...

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lyn to Cypress Hills on the Queens border, have already endorsed a name change.

The vote followed two years of discussion, a series of public hearings and a few incendiary racial exchanges, some of which spilled over Tuesday night in the meeting at the New York City College of Technology.

"I'm exasperated but exhausted," said Fred Laverpool, the founder of Braggini About Brooklyn, a company that promotes tours of black historic sites in New York City, who was among the key community leaders fighting for the issue.

Laverpool, who was accompanied by activists from the Committee to Honor Black Heroes, packed the committee meeting and there was no lack of tension as the group of mostly white committee members hashed out the issue between themselves and with the Cuban supporters.

Transportation Committee Chairwoman Nancy Wolf ruled with a heavy hand as tensions flared in the college classroom.

A comment by board member Bill Harris that Tubman "had nothing to do with Brooklyn," set off proponents of the naming who told Harris he "had no idea what he was talking about."

Committee member Ken Lowy stepped up to say that Tubman's relationship to Brooklyn was irrelevant and noted that it defied historical figures, including Martin Luther King Jr., had streets named after them even though they didn't live in Brooklyn.

The street renaming issue has been pulling at the seams of the already contentious community board for two years.

Demographically, CB2 is an economically and racially diverse district encompassing the predominantly white neighborhoods of Brooklyn Heights and DUMBO to the west and the largely black neighborhoods of Fort Greene and Clinton Hill to the east.

But preservationists have argued the historic relevance of the naming of Fulton Street for Robert Fulton, an inventor and artist who successfully applied the steam engine to nautical transportation, opening up ferry service and commerce between Brooklyn and Manhattan before they were a bridge. Streets on either side of the East River are named in his honor.

SCHOOL...

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zalez and Gentile hope the funding will persuade city officials to include Telecommunication HS in the next five-year school construction capital budget.

"We want this project done and we want that message made clear this time around," said Gentile, who noted that if the plans aren't submitted by next month, the next opportunity for the school to receive funding for construction would likely be in 2008.

School officials estimate that the construction costs of a new building would reach \$9 million. But Weinberg said that building an entirely new school, which would have to include a cafeteria and gymnasium, would cost nearly \$36 million.

"You go into these substandard classes, and what it says is 'Your work doesn't matter.' We're simply looking to take an exemplary school and give it exemplary classroom space," he said.

Telecommunication HS is consistently marked as one of the city's best public schools. Last year's graduating class, according to Weinberg, earned \$5.5 million in scholarships to such schools as Amherst and Columbia University.

"We're mandated to take an average population," he said of his school's policy of accepting a mix of higher and lower achieving students. "But this year's graduating class was anything but average."

In addition to the auditorium busby space, four classrooms in two red trailers in a park across the street accommodate 750 students a day. During the school day, 67th Street, which divides the school and its trailers, is closed to traffic "in theory," said Weinberg. But cars still manage to swerve around the sign blocking the road between Third and Fourth avenues.

TELECOMMUNICATION HIGH SCHOOL

Telecommunication High School Principal Philip Weinberg with Councilman Vincent Gentile outside the school Monday.

Sixteen-year-old Aisha Ithikhar and Jana Koopekhar said that negotiating the route between the outside trailers and inside classrooms in the three minutes allotted between classes is nearly impossible. "It's really, really, really hard," said Ithikhar, a junior.

The school's growth — last year more than 5,000 students applying for fewer than 300 seats — is part of a trend in the city shared by neighboring Fort Hamilton High School and John F. Kennedy High School in the Bronx. Like Kennedy HS, whose cases was documented in a New York Times article earlier this month, Telecommunication HS has four lunch periods, the first of which begins at 9:47 a.m.

The reason for the breakfast-time lunch period is because the cafeteria is a good place to store 250 students at a time. But for the remaining four periods of the day, said Weinberg, all 48 classrooms, including 12 temporary rooms and five science labs, are occupied. "We're a quarter of the size of Fort Hamilton," he said. "If you send us 100 students, it's like sending them 400."

DEBATE...

Continued from page 1
needed someone to fight tax increases, but we didn't have it.

Gentile responded by saying that during his campaign he had only opposed Mayor Michael Bloomberg's 18.5-percent property tax hike, and that the sales and income taxes he supported had brought the city \$53 million in sorely needed debt relief.

"I've kept my promise," Gentile said, adding that the new taxes did not harm his constituents, and that since taking office he had brought more than \$2.3 million to the district.

Sponsored by the Men's Club of Bay Ridge, the decision was approved by 75 residents of the 43rd Council District. After Gentile and Russo each delivered five-minute introductory speeches, many residents took the floor in a question-and-answer session with the candidates.

Several questions concerned what residents described as deteriorating conditions in the community's public schools. One man asked the candidates how they would solve the problem of overcrowding in high schools.

Russo responded by calling the overcrowding problem "one of the clearest examples of the failure of our public officials," and suggested establishing a new high school in the community.

Gentile, who has made the creation of a new high school part of his campaign, fired back. "I'm glad that my opponent is finally catching on to my call for a new high school." He said he had already helped reduce enrollment at Fort Hamilton High School, which has nearly 5,000 students in a building originally built to hold 2,400, and that more work needed to be done.

After Russo mentioned enrolling his daughter in a parochial school, Gentile, a graduate of Fort Hamilton High School said, "I don't think you can say that's wrong with the public schools unless you send your children to public schools." The comment drew loud applause.

During his campaign for the council seat vacated by Mary Ann Manno in November 2002 ended Gentile's three-term tenure in the state Senate — Gentile earned the mayor's scorn when he included a photograph of the mayor's Upper East Side townhouse on some of his campaign literature slamming the property tax hike. "Unlike our billionaire mayor, Winnie Gentile knows how hard it is to make ends meet," the material read.

A member of the audience asked Gentile whether he considered the use of the photo to be irresponsible in light of terrorist threats in the city. The councilman said that the same photo had already appeared in the Daily News and that the mayor's townhouse was constantly surrounded by "hordes of police."

Alluding to the property tax increase, Gentile said, "He has hurt this community and I am going to fight him." Then, turning his sights on his opponent, Gentile pointed out that Russo had taken the maximum allowable campaign contribution of \$2,750.

REPUBLICAN CITY COUNCIL CANDIDATE PAT RUSSO FIELDS A QUESTION MONDAY NIGHT.

Republican City Council candidate Pat Russo fields a question Monday night.

From Bloomberg, a fellow Republican, and was therefore "in no position to fight this mayor."

"I'm not going to take a personal shot at the mayor," Russo responded. When asked how the mayor's tacit endorsement would affect his ability to work in a community adamantly opposed to the property tax hike, Russo said, "I can be independent of the mayor. He and I disagree, we disagree. But where he and I can work together for the benefit of the community, who's going to be hurt by that?"

Russo later added, "I would never have an adversarial relationship with my mayor."

Throughout the debate Gentile highlighted his legislative experience while Russo pointed to his many years of volunteer work in the district.

Also at issue for the candidates was the question of whether the city should switch to non-partisan elections, which is a ballot item in the Nov. 4 elections. Scott Gastel, Gentile's senior advisor, said that Gentile is opposed to non-partisan elections. Russo supports the initiative, which was launched by the mayor, who is also heavily funding advertising for the referendum.

In their closing remarks, both candidates returned to the tax issue.

"Any tax that has a disproportionate impact on the people I represent, I will vote against that tax," vowed Gentile.

Russo complained that since Gentile came into office voters were "paying more and getting less," and that "when it comes to the financial crisis facing the city, my opponent was boxed into the Democratic leadership." He then accidentally referred to the mayor as "Mayor Giuliano." "My opponent forgets," he responded a smiling Gentile, "the mayor is Michael Bloomberg, the one who gave him a campaign contribution of \$2,750."