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Urban Hikes: A zig-zag path through Olmsted Park

By Sally Sears

It's always an adventure to walk on Ponce de Leon Avenue. Best to pick a good partner, and I did. George Ickes is a rangy six-foot, five-inch neighbor with secret weapons in the trunk of his car.

A rainy night had left Ponce soggy when we stepped off on a fall Tuesday morning. I'd parked across the street from Druid Hills Presbyterian Church, and we walked toward Decatur, past the Majestic Diner, where a woman at a window table nursed a crossword puzzle and a cup of coffee. (She did not smile. Must have forgotten a five-letter word for "facial improvement.")

It was gray on the sidewalk until we passed the broad front of Druid Hills Baptist Church. I'd never admired the fancy cupola on top before. It's a short counterpoint to the taller spire of Druid Hills Methodist on the other side of the street.

George was accelerating when we crossed Moreland and Briarcliff. "Just look at that!" he gestured. Before us was Springdale Park, the first segment of the Olmsted Linear Park that stretches east along Ponce. Designed by Frederick Law Olmsted (who also designed New York City's Central Park) in the 1890s, the park was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1975. George just happens to be in charge of maintenance for the Olmsted Linear Park Association, which continues to restore the green space.

We found the asphalt path great footing for a brisk pace. Even without sun, the wide vistas turned the gray day into green.

The miles added up as one park merged easily into the next. Under the giant oaks and native hydrangea, it was easy to ignore rush-hour traffic. This morning, few sparkling people in spandex edged us. We had the woods and meadows to ourselves.

There's much to notice when you tune out the traffic. An oak across from the Primitive Baptist Church bears a giant heart carved in its trunk. And next to Paideia School, a massive tree has exposed roots that could hide an entire town of hobbits.

When two redbuds barred our passage with low-hanging branches, George warmed to the thought of trimming them.

One secret in his trunk would come in handy right now.

We crossed Peavine Creek at Lullwater, noting the clear water and open walkways along the bank, maintained by the Paideia School students. Ahead is a tough hill moving up toward Clifton Road. We stretched into it, and recalled the next park segment, Shadyside, when it was a protest

camp. Tents of neighbors objected decades ago when state transportation planners wanted to pierce the parks and build a highway. Now Shadyside is smooth and green, with a scar on top of the hill where five oaks yielded to drought and high winds. But right across Clifton, a nest of rugosa roses rewarded us with the sight of big, fat orange rose hips. (Earlier this year on another walk, a friend asked me why those rose bushes were growing cherry tomatoes. I did not want to expose her to horticultural humiliation, then. But you know who you are, friend!)

At this point, I could have used a stop across Ponce de Leon at Fernbank Museum, where the dining room has great sandwiches and hot coffee. But we pressed on. I did vow to return for the *Imperial Rome* exhibit, to check out those Centurions in Skirts.

Past Fernbank, the park at Clifton sprawls down a grassy slope, into DeKalb County. George tells me it's almost impossible to get both the crews from DeKalb and the City of Atlanta to cut at the same time. So the lawn is either half cut or not. It's a secret I look for now, like a glass half empty, or a tree falling in a forest no one is around to hear.

At the foot of this hill, George revealed another mystery. Why does this park, alone, collect Frappuccino bottles? We'd seen the usual urban mix as we walked, but here at the Fraser Center entrance, George tells me he often finds nothing but Starbucks Frappuccino. Perhaps it's a good branding opportunity for the park's annual fall cleanup day.

Up the next hill, switching to the north side of Ponce de Leon, the park is heavily wooded and filled with the noise of a little creek running into Fernbank Forest. It's the biggest urban woods open to the public free of charge in all of Atlanta. The paths are soft mulch, no asphalt inside Deepdene Park. Speed walkers could stay on the pavement on North Ponce. But at the top of the hill, we were a good ways from the diner, and ready to turn back.

With more time, we could have walked on into downtown Decatur, and found sidewalks and all kinds of food and drink and shopping for the hike back.

But on this Tuesday, I was ready to see what else George Ickes keeps in his trunk. Five grades of weed killer, from gentle to serious. And a wonderful saw on a stick. Nothing mechanical, purely practical. George and his arsenal are among the reasons Ponce de Leon and the parks that sculpt its edge are so green and welcoming.

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