

Realtors come together for community projects



23 HOURS AGO • [JANE AMMESON TIMES CORRESPONDENT](#)

To transform a patch of non-descript land on the southeast corner of 45th and Fifth Street, the Highland Community Foundation used fundraising and grants.

Those included a Placemaking Grant awarded by the Greater Northwest Indiana Association of Realtors to create a landscaped park with a memorial plaza and sculpture in honor of Ashley Ritz. She was a Highland senior who lost her life in car accident at that intersection more than a decade ago.

According to Richard Underkofler, HFC secretary, the 13-foot high sculpture, was financed by gifts from Ritz's family, neighbors, classmates and Highland businesses. A \$3,750 grant from Legacy Foundation also contributed to the funding. Designed, fabricated and installed by metal artist Randy Simko, the 5.6-foot-column was fabricated from Corten steel, an alloy developed to eliminate the need for painting that quickly develops a stable rustlike patina when exposed to the weather.

Arcs above the column are made of stainless steel. At the dedication, Simko presented a model of his creation to Ritz's parents, Gary and Donna Ritz.

Jim Dal Santo, president of HFC, said the sale of the engraved personalized pavers surrounding the sculpture are also help funding the park.

"We've sold around 100 pavers," said Dal Santo, noting that any donations such as buying pavers to add to the memorial site is tax deductible given the HFC's recognition as a 501(c)(3) corporation by the IRS. These and other contributions are needed for landscape features planned for future construction, including more donor inscribed bricks as well as labor and material to design and construct a Pergola over a portion of an interior pathway.

A \$2,300 Placemaking micro-grant from the National Association of Realtors was given by GNIAR to help make this Highland neighborhood a better place to live and work by transforming an unused public lot into a vibrant community space says Nichole DeMario, director of Communications and Professional Development for GNIAR.

"GNIAR is putting together a committee of local Realtors and we are actively seeking community project ideas such as this," DeMario said.

DeMario adds that this the first time they have used the grant program, which is intended to help Realtor associations partner with others to plan, organize, implement and maintain Placemaking activities in their communities. They hope it is just one of many GNIAR funded

community projects to come.

Grant amounts range from \$500 to \$2,500.

"The most important aspect of a project is that needs to create an actual, physical place, at an outside location for the entire community to meet and gather," said Rose Dobbins, a residential broker with Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage in Highland and the 2015 president of GNIAR. "Priority is given to projects that create new places in the community but if an existing place is being enhanced, the grant committee looks at whether a 'place within a place' is created."

Other grant parameters focus on what the National Association of Realtor terms the Power of Ten — a great place that offers at least 10 things to do or 10 reasons to be there (place to sit, art to touch, music to hear, food to eat, history to experience, people to meet, place to read, areas to play, people to watch, place to shop, things to learn, paths to walk, etc.).

The greenspace improvement at 45th and Fifth streets was the perfect fit for a Placemaking Grant, which paid for the purchase and installation of three park benches. The former vacant lot is owned by BP Pipelines.

"BP has a 99 year lease with the Highland Parks Department who will be doing the maintenance on the property," says Dal Santo. "But the creation of the park is not a town project, but instead is a project of the HFC."

HFC, a nonprofit, all-volunteer organization, formed "with the vision of bringing people together for a specific purpose, to show pride in our town, and to continuously improve life within our community," has several other community projects. They included providing incentives for public art, extending the bike trail along LaPorte Street to loop with the Little Calumet River trail at the Rookery and providing operating expenses for the revitalized Town Theatre.

Others contributions to the park came from community partners such as BP Foundation, Community Foundation of Northwest Indiana, local businesses and private donations. Irrigation and electrical systems were donated by Rainmaker Irrigation and EMCOR Hyre Electric. Labor for light fixtures was donated by Pure Illumination.

"HFC is about community," Dal Santo said. "And so are grants like Placemaking."

To learn more about the Highland Community Foundation, visit highlandcommunityfoundation.org; for information about Placemaking Grants, visit gniar.com.