

Neighbor

Group on a mission to save their skate park

It's among the first lessons learned in grade school: don't judge a book by its cover.

Those types of misconceptions can lead to their own brand of misfortune — not bothering to know an exceptional individual.



Sherry Lenhart
Villa Park

Skaters are sadly familiar with such misconceptions. The

term skater, in this context, does not refer to ice skaters, but rather to skateboarders.

"Skateboarders" may bring to mind a variety of negatives, from irresponsible to irredeemable.

One group of young Villa Park skaters, however, is bucking that stereotype. They recently went out of their way to formally thank the Villa Park village board for trustees' efforts to look beyond misconceptions, and support efforts to save the group's source of recreation: the 2-4-8 Skate Park at Jefferson Park.

Last summer, the park's future was uncertain after many problems with vandalism and loitering. Some residents hoped to get rid of

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the park completely.

Currently tucked into a relatively remote area tempting to vandals, the skate park is seen by some as both an eyesore and magnet for illegal activity.

"The problems were not with the skaters," said Villa Park Recreation's superintendent of recreation, Carrie Karl. "The skaters were not creating challenges."

But they did become part of the solution.

A group of the skaters who used the park for its intended purpose quickly came together to form the Skate Park Committee. Their goal? To keep the park from closing indefinitely.

Committee member Jeff Syc, 16, described the response to the potential closing as immediate and automatic.

"We said, 'We've got to save it,'" Syc said.

Paulina Jimenez, mother of 7-year-old skater Joel Anderson, opened her home to the committee that's met regularly for the past year.

With direction and resolve, the skaters planned what needed to be done to save the park.

"(Jimenez) said 'Let's do something.' She was willing to be active and not just make suggestions," Karl said.

In the end, the effort paid off. With support from the village board, the skaters didn't just save their park, they'll be getting a new one. It'll be built just west of the Iowa Community Center, visible from Addison Road. It's tentatively scheduled to open in 2010.

The village currently is researching grant opportunities to help pay for the new facility, which will include new equipment for skaters of all ages.

The Parks and Recreation Department plans to develop programming to make the most of the facility, including inviting top skaters to offer lessons. The better visibility of the new location also will allow police officers to monitor activity at the park.

Karl hopes the new location also will offer parents a place to keep children occupied while siblings participate in activities held indoors at the Iowa Community Center.

It's a somewhat remarkable turn of events for the Skate Park Committee, which Syc acknowledged had the burden of overcoming negative stereotypes.

To express their gratitude for the village board's ongoing support in the matter, about a dozen skaters attended the March 10 board meeting to present a unique thank-you gift — a custom-made skateboard signed by each of the Villa Park skaters.

The group included Joel Anderson, 7; Oscar Rodriguez, 10; Gary Tews, 14; Matt Cavazos, 14; Ian Escallier, 15; Sergio Samaniego, 15; Ryan Hetzel, 15; Sam O'Rielly, 16; Calvin Krieg, 16; Jeff Syc, 16; Darko Mihajlovic, 19 and Kevin Dayton, 19.

"They feel like they were heard and respected," Jimenez said, adding that those 12 boys were only a portion of the total number who regularly attended Skate Park Committee meetings.

It's important that all residents be treated with respect and attention, regardless of their age, said village trustee Tom Cullerton.

"Everybody should be heard, not just those who can vote," he said.