



An Ode to Central Park

Written by: Margie Goldsmith
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I used to measure my runs by distance: exactly one mile from my apartment to the 59th Street entrance of Central Park; a full loop around the park road is exactly 6 miles minus 33 yards; the shorter loop cutting off both ends is 4 miles minus 77 yards. And I knew my basic park landmarks.

First I'd pass the life-sized statue of a panther on Cat Hill sitting on a rock outcropping around 76th Street. It was dawn the first time I saw it—a panther crouched and ready to pounce. Did it break out of the zoo? I gasped. I froze. Then I raced up the hill praying it wouldn't choose me for breakfast.

Next there was the Obelisk or Cleopatra's Needle, the largest outdoor antiquity in NYC that has hieroglyphs dating back 3500 years. If it was early enough to still be dark I'd look at the silhouettes of the Greek statues inside the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which seem surreal at that time of day. I loved coming down the hill and seeing the visitor's center at Harlem Meer, which is like a child's fantasy castle, then up Andy's Hill where icicles hang from the boulders in winter past the tennis courts and down to the carousel before leaving the park.

That was my run until one perfect fall morning just before the NYC Marathon. The leaves were blanketed in bright colors and the sun cast shadows on the ground carpeted with yellow, red and orange leaves. I was starting a 6-mile run passing the Shakespeare statue leading to Literary Walk when I glanced towards the stand of American elm trees. The golden yellow-leafed canopy beckoned me and for once I veered from my normal route. I turned onto the path and ran past the statues of Robert Burns and Sir Walter Scott listening to my running shoes crunch the fallen leaves. Up ahead a group of people was clustered around tree expert and Central Park Conservancy VP of Operations Neil Calvanese. I stopped.

He was giving a tree tour. I heard him say there were 26,000 trees in Central Park and that the largest intact stand of existing American elms was right here. He pointed to a 150-year-old gnarly English elm that reminded me of an elephant's leg. Then he moved the group north to a tree perched on top of a rock. "You couldn't have planted that," he said. He pointed out tree after tree, naming each one. I followed the tour until I was noticed and then I ran off.

That moment made me realize that for years I'd been clocking mileage, racing past in my sneakers without really seeing the park and all it had to offer. Now I rarely stick to the park loop. I run on the pathways, under the bridges, through the Ramble and around the pond to the waterfalls in the west 90s. Sure, I still count mileage. I know that the upper Reservoir track is 1.57 miles and the Bridle Path is 1.66, but I also know that the trees on the eastern side of the Reservoir are Yoshino Cherry trees and those on the western side are Kwanzan cherries.

Sometimes I run to Strawberry Fields or jog over to Pilgrim Hill a little south of the boat pond where I can see a three-trunked black tupelo and a Colorado blue spruce. Other times—when I want silence—I head for the North Woods where little has changed since the 1850s and I feel as though I'm somewhere in the Adirondacks. Every now and then I'll do steps up and down Bethesda Terrace then run underneath to look at the restored Minton tiles and feel as though I'm in Europe. I listen to all the different languages and if I see tourists struggling over a map I stop to give them directions. On each run I find something I've never seen before: the Wisteria Pergola overlooking the Mall or the 13 original colonies engraved into the concrete walk above the fountain of the Conservatory Garden.

If it weren't for Central Park I'd have no city oasis, no place where I could run or bike or use a park bench for push-ups the way we do in my early morning outdoor boot camp class. I love the park after a fresh snowfall when I'm the first to make footprints on the Great Lawn. I love the park in the rain when no one's around and I can wail "I'm Singing in the Rain" at the top of my lungs. In the summer when it's hot there's always a shady tree; and in autumn, I am mesmerized by the elms and maples cloaked in brilliant hues.

I wanted to give back to my park in some way, but I wasn't sure how. Then one day while sitting on a bench I knew exactly what to do. If you happen to be walking from east to west on Literary Walk look at the first bench on the right opposite the statue of Robert Burns.

There you'll see the plaque on the bench I have endowed:

Margie's Bench

Please use this bench to tell someone how much you care. Kiss, hug, cuddle canoodle, touch, smile, laugh, and do tricep dips and push-ups! You too can endow a bench, a tree or a paving stone near Literary Walk. Just go to www.centralparknyc.org to give back.

Comments

Eunice Fried

|| 06.02.2008

I loved Margie Goldsmith's story. She took me on a wonderful and detailed run through the park. But it was not only the places she mentioned, it was the insight she brought to it and the beauty she evoked. Kudos.

Rebecca Thomas

|| 06.03.2008

What a beautiful and inspirational tale.

Susan Chagrin

|| 06.04.2008

I enjoyed this piece so much! Since I am also a "Central Park Lover" (who isn't??) and it is my primary workout venue, I can definitely relate. As I ran the NY Road Runners 50th Anniversary 5 mile race in the RAIN today at 5:30 AM-I was really tempted to break out into "I'm Singing in the Rain!" But...it wasn't exactly like I was out there alone (5,000 entrants)! Great article Margie. Thank you!

sue cohen

|| 06.05.2008

This is a wonderful article about a wonderful place. Thank you Margie.

Bob Sommerville

|| 06.08.2008

Having now walked with Margie, through, over, and around Central Park for many hours, I must admit that, yes, it is a wonderful and special place and this article on trees exemplifies both the park, in all its many splendors and Margie's interesting and touching dissertation on not just the trees but the total "park" experience...nice work ..well written! Thanks!