

LOOSE ENDS

Gates symbolize unity in communities

By Pam Hersh, Special Writer

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July 4, the nation's birthday, reminds me of my grandkids' first birthdays. The fireworks celebrations seem to go on endlessly and sometimes end in meltdowns.

Knowing that my 3-year-old Harry has a bad case of fireworks phobia and wanting to avoid his meltdown, I took him to see a different sort of spectacular display in the center of Princeton. He loves all the pre-fireworks play — running around, the glo-sticks, the food, the flags, balloons, streamers, bubble guns, Nerf balls — so he had a great time at the (July 3) Spirit of Princeton Fireworks — until the fireworks actually happened.

He watched the entire show while curled up in his mother's lap with a blanket over his head. So on July 4, when the rest of the family was watching fireworks in another municipality, Harry and I celebrated the Fourth in a way that I found inspiring and he found "awesome."



Harry and I hung out in Hinds Plaza at dusk, ate our Cheese Doodles (comparable to orange glo sticks), and watched the people go by. Harry had a grand time running around the newly installed Albert E. Hinds Gates and running his hands over the beautiful cutout designs on the gates. Without the boom, boom, boom of fireworks, without music, without barbecue, without the ice pops, we had an inspiring day, thanks to the Hinds Gates and Harry's newly adopted friends who joined him in the game of toddler ring-around-the-Gates.

The Gates represent historic inspiration, rather than preservation, according to Shirley Satterfield, historian of the Witherspoon-Jackson neighborhood and the African American community in Princeton. That fact became obvious as the Hinds Gates became a focal point for my Independence Day celebration.

Installed two weeks ago, the Gates honor Albert E. Hinds whose long life (he died at the age of 104 in June 2006) was interwoven with the story of Princeton's civil rights struggle. He was a mentor to and friend of all the residents of the John Witherspoon community and a change agent in the area of civil rights.

He was a passionate believer in the ability of citizens to bring diverse communities together — to open the gates separating the communities and welcome each other into their worlds. Drawing from the wisdom of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Mr. Hinds lived his life according to the simple principle of "It's always the right time to do the right thing," words that have been imbedded into the design of the Gates.

The day before my July 4 celebration with my grandson, I received a tutorial from Shirley who elaborated not only on the Gates and Mr. Hinds, but also on the history of the Witherspoon-Jackson community. Shirley, a teacher and guidance counselor by profession, claimed she hated — "may have even flunked" — history when she was a student at Princeton High School. But her friendship with Mr. Hinds and her intense interest in her heritage led to her role of leading Princeton Historical Society African American Heritage tours of Princeton, now known as the "Albert E. Hinds Memorial Walking Tour: African-American Life in Princeton."

My grandson's group of ring-around-the-Gates players shared age, gender, energy and a joie de vive, but had parents who were all born in different parts of the world: New Jersey (not quite a country, but almost), Russia, Guatemala, Korea and Jamaica. Speaking New Jerseyan, I tried to convey to the moms and dads of the toddlers what Shirley had shared with me about Princeton's history of overcoming a racially divided and segregated community. My audience of parents listened intently, all of whom were fascinated to learn about the heritage of the community in which they now were living.

"It never even occurred to me that Princeton had to deal with the discrimination and integration issues so intensely and personally . . . I feel very proud to be living here — connected to the Gates," said a mom, who came to this country when she was 7 years old.

The inspiration for a piece of art in the Plaza came in April 2007, when Princeton Borough's Mayor and Council honored Albert E. Hinds' life of 104 years and his 90 years of service to the Princeton community by naming the "Library Plaza" on Witherspoon Street, the Albert E. Hinds Community Plaza. The Council made its decision after presentations by Ms. Satterfield, former Township Mayor Jim Floyd, former Borough Mayor Yina Moore and other citizens who spoke about Mr. Hinds as a mentor, historian, trailblazer and friend to all during his long life. A committee of community leaders was charged to create a permanent memorial that captured Mr. Hinds' legacy and vision.

Sculptor Tom Nussbaum of Montclair was selected in the fall of 2008 to create the piece of public art that was to be a tribute to Mr. Hinds, as well as a symbol of the spirit and principles of the community in which the individual lived.

Committee Chair Barbara Trelstad said the Gates monument "successfully achieves a combination of aesthetic beauty and powerful symbolism that represents the role Mr. Hinds played in bringing our community together. It is fitting that in this year that the two Princetons have come together as one town that we celebrate with the installation of these gates."

The designs within the gates are drawn from the fabric of Mr. Hinds' life, quilting patterns symbolizing his family's history of slavery, his working life in Princeton, his deep engagement with the local church, his strong presence in the Witherspoon neighborhood, the car he drove until age 102, and, of course, the motto that guided his life.

Mayor Liz Lempert quoted Mr. Hinds in her inaugural address to the community. "We, too, believe that 'it is always the right time to do the right thing.' We hope that the community will agree."

I have no idea whether Mr. Hinds ever envisioned bringing together the community with the diversity I witnessed on July 4. But to borrow a line from my grandson, I think he might have found it "awesome."

A longtime resident of Princeton, Pam Hersh is vice president for government community affairs with Princeton HealthCare System. She is a former managing editor of The Princeton Packet.

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