

No. Edison

Edison: Recreation Dept.

celebrates

Minnie Veal

HN 10/20/91

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EDISON — Before there were stately homes in North Edison, there was the Potters Crossing project carved out of pristine farmland and forest.

Before there was a community center in North Edison, there was a fledgling recreation building on Inman and Grove avenues where children found a place to play, learn and hope.

Somewhere between the infancy and transformation of this largely upscale Edison village, a social worker from Georgia named Minnie Bell Veal called North Edison home. And the whole township was better because of it.

Minnie Veal, who died in 1988, is being honored today, as the community center that bears her name on Grove Avenue celebrates its first year of operation.

Words such as "pioneer" and "tireless" are used to describe the woman who provided recreation programs for children in North Edison for more than 40 years.

"She always stressed education — 'Got to get ahead, got to get away, got to get skilled and work hard. And when you do,

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"you pull someone else up with you," said Joe Harvest, a North Edison native; who said Veal motivated him through "the focal points" in his life, his high school and college years.

"She pressed hard to get you to believe you could be what she thought you could be," Harvest said. "She said I had to go off to college and come back and be some kind of role model for children." Harvest graduated from Virginia Union University, Richmond, Va. The 49-year-old Plainfield resident works as a guidance counselor for the Woodrow Wilson Middle School.

Veal was the first township recreation director in the mid 1950s, when she was appointed by former Mayor Anthony M. Yelencsics. The Potters Crossing Community Center then stood on property the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development later took to build the Inman Grove Shopping Center. The center was headquarters for all of the social, cultural, civic and recreational activities in the north end of town, which at that time was largely populated by blacks.

When the Potters recreation center was torn down, the programs never stopped, said Robert Holmes of Inman Avenue, who worked closely with Veal. "She ran the programs out of the North Edison Gardens. During her stay, the programs lasted all day, year-round."

Mount Pleasant Baptist Church on Grove Avenue served as another surrogate site.

Veal also was a charter member of a local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Persons, and one of the original members of the North Edison Civic Improvement Association. Started in 1944, the association was created "to improve the living conditions, and to get the services needed for the (north Edison) community," said Association President Abdur-Rahim Rasheed.

"Years ago, there was a big difference between north and south," Rasheed said. North Edison actually resembled farm living "down south," because the residents raised their own livestock and vegetables for sustenance, Harvest said.

Today, the North Edison Gardens public housing project coexists with \$300,000 homes, Rasheed said. "In the last three years we have seen some of our roads paved and street signs put up. In the south end, they have their garbage picked up by the township, but still in the north, we have to pay for an outside hauler to do it, and sometimes it's twice as much money," he said.

Progress in North Edison has

been the product of community commitment. It took five civic groups to sue HUD and the township in 1975-76 to ensure the north end received a 2-acre park, a 10-acre park now known as Elder Park, and a community center, said Councilwoman Jane Tousman. As a League of Women Voters member, Tousman was a plaintiff in the suit. Joining the league was the local NAACP, the

North Edison Tenants Association and its crusader-president Mildred Burns, the local chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women and the Edison Women's Caucus.

North Edison residents waited until 1990 to see the Minnie Veal Center built. Holmes said they waited 23 years from the time the Potters recreation building was torn down until the new center was ready.

Tousman said the current needs of the north end could be better met by providing more social services to the women and children of North Edison Gardens. "I think we are doing some fine work for schoolwork, but we should have a drug counselor available at the center, and someone attuned to women's needs," she said, adding that funding could be found

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— Joe Harvest

by dipping into the Community Development Block Grant, which has \$21,000 untouched now.

Mayor Samuel V. Convery Jr. has helped formed the Human Rights Commission. "It's an attempt at a local level to promote awareness of racial bias or abuse. The commission is made up of diverse people, so if there is a problem, we will have people who know how to handle it," he said.

The association still presses and waits for other changes, namely better minority representation, from the ranks of the police and fire departments to the teachers, principals and school board members, Rasheed said. "The mayor is trying to be helpful," Rasheed said. In the schools, "We've been dealing with (Superintendent) Joe Kreskey. In January, we invited the school board to one of our meetings, and five members came. We feel like we are getting an opportunity to air these things."

The association is fortunate to be in a township with such an ethnically diverse population, Rasheed said, but would like to see more recognition for the black community. "The school district realized there was diversity when the Asian and Indian population moved in, but we were already here," Rasheed said. "We feel somewhat forgotten." 1990 U.S. Census figures indicate there are 4,935 blacks in Edison, or 5.6 percent of the township's population.

The association feels it has enough momentum to carry the torch Minnie Veal lit more than 40 years ago.

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Minnie Veal Community Center of North Edison celebrates first year in its new, modern facility.

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