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Movable Chairs

In U.S. parks, most benches and other forms of seating are usually affixed to something — whether it be by bolts, chains or concrete — to reduce the risk of theft, making their arrangement very static. So, when retired General Mills executive Mark Addicks witnessed how being able to literally pull up a chair and have face-to-face interactions created a social atmosphere on the quad at St. Olaf College campus in Northfield, Minnesota, he was inspired to start the Minneapolis Good Chair Project. He decided, based on the premise that you can make life better and build community simply by adding some comfortable, movable seating to outdoor spaces, to be the primary funder of what he called “Good Chairs” to be added to his Lake of the Isles neighborhood park. Giving people the opportunity to move a chair closer to watch a game or into the shade just might lead them to slow down, enjoy the park and have more of the social interactions he witnessed at St. Olaf College. So, this summer, Addicks sought out and got approval from the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board (MPRB) to launch this project.

Addicks approached Anita Tabb, a MPRB member, with his idea, and because the board is working to create equity in its park system, she asked him if he’d be willing to also place the chairs in an underserved community’s park. “He happily agreed to fund chairs in two parks and away we went! Good Chairs were placed in Curry Park, a heavily used park in a predominantly Somali immigrant neighborhood that desperately needed the additional seating,” she explained.

Addicks enlisted Minneapolis furniture maker Willie Willette Works to custom design 33 Good Chairs out of white oak. They’re large enough for two people and into each is carved four imperatives that encourage passersby to either “Sit. Share. Debate. Engage.” “Sit. Read. Think. Imagine.” “Sit. Breathe. Contemplate. Meditate.” or “Sit. Laugh. Cry. Kiss.”

“I would be lying if I said we weren’t concerned about having them stolen, but we figured that this was an experiment, and we were going to see if it worked,” Tabb confesses. And, the chairs have been very well received by the communities in which they were placed. In fact, in Curry Park, a group of Somali women have taken responsibility for the Good Chairs. “They have taken such ownership of the chairs and have taken such good care of them,” Addicks adds. He’s been so inspired by what he calls the first phase of the project, that he’s launched a \$100,000 Kickstarter campaign to help pay to expand it to other parks. You can learn more about the Good Chair project on its Facebook page www.facebook.com/GoodChairProject.

— *Sonia Myrick, Managing Editor of Parks & Recreation magazine.*

