

Gathering Place

Jeff Stava describes the planning, preparation, and opening of Tulsa's award-winning, world-renowned park.

Chapter 01 - 1:02

Introduction

Announcer: Gathering Place in Tulsa, Oklahoma, is a hundred-acre park. Construction on the park began in September 2014. The first 66.5 acres opened September 2018. The main attractions are the Chapman Adventure Playground, the Williams Lodge, a boathouse, Splash Playground, Great Lawn, Outdoor Sports Court, Escape Park, a Wetland Pond and Garden, and many trails, among other locations.

Voices of Oklahoma felt it was important to have an oral history recording detailing the overall construction, its challenges, description of materials used, and the emotional connection to the city. We did this so future generations using the park could hear the voice of Jeff Stava, the executive director and chief operating officer of the project describe the planning, the preparation, and the opening of the park, and so they could understand the reason for such an enormous commitment by the George Kaiser Family Foundation.

Now listen to Jeff Stava tell the story of Gathering Place, from beginning to opening day, on the oral history website VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 02 - 9:11

First Six Months

John Erling: For Voices of Oklahoma, this is John Erling. Today's date is December 19, 2018.

And I'm sitting in the Williams Lodge of the Gathering Place in front of this great fireplace here in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

With me this morning is Jeff Stava, executive director of Tulsa's Gathering Place, chief operating officer. Good morning, Jeff.

Jeff Stava: Good morning, John, how are you?

JE: I am fine. We've got this table set in front of the fireplace, it's just so great.

JS: It is, isn't it?

JE: We appreciate you doing this and we're here to talk about the timeline of the Gathering Place and the challenges along the way. This oral history interview is probably really for the generations yet to be born, who will be using this wonderful place years from now.

Was that in your head as you were building too? *I know I'm building it for now but what about 2030, '35, and '40?*

JS: It's totally in our mind, in fact, we had a motto for all the workers and all the designers to do your very best, whether it was pouring the sidewalks or constructing the playground equipment. Your handy work today would last generations of Tulsans to come, so do your very best work. Yeah, it was in our minds, and that's really kind of in everyone's minds as we looked at this project. And that's why the quality level is so high, the attention to detail is so high, because this isn't a project that's a ten- or twenty- or thirty-year project, it's a hundred-plus-year project. And that's really the way we thought of it all the way.

JE: Yeah.

JS: Through design and construction.

JE: We should say at the outset that the George Kaiser Family Foundation and many generous donors left to you, the future generations, a \$465 million investment. The Foundation provided \$200 million; \$200 million came from corporations, private donors; city provided \$65 million to it.

JS: Yeah, the city and the county with the public infrastructure around the site.

JE: Right. Here we've just finished one hundred days of the park being open. I was thinking in the year 2068, fifty years from now, it would be interesting to see how the numbers I just stated may be viewed. They may say, "Ah, that was cheap."

JS: [laughing] They probably will. A friend of mine unearthed a plan for river parks; it was from the late '70s. And the river development up and down was \$32.5 million dollars. That had buildings and it had retail, it had a whole lot of different things up and down the banks of the river here in the center part of town.

So, yeah, I think they'll look back and say, "What a great investment! What a small amount of money. I can't believe they built it for that." I do truly believe that.

JE: We'll cover the details, challenges, and, I suppose, some unexpected surprises that came along with construction of this project.

So, as we do in oral history, Jeff, your birth date, your age, your birth place?

JS: Jeff Stava. My full name is William John Stava III, it's my formal given name; Jeff's my nickname. I was born in Limestone, Maine, on an air force base. My father was in the military. My mom and I went to Indianapolis while he was in Vietnam.

And then when he came back from Vietnam he came to Tulsa. His grandfather, his mom's dad, came across into Oklahoma into a covered wagon and settled the town of Wagoner, Oklahoma. He was the metalsmith. He had a business that was right on the railroad tracks there at Main and the railroad tracks. He was a blacksmith, he shoed horses, he took care of just anything that people needed repaired or fixed in Wagoner.

And so we came back to Tulsa and my dad worked with a couple of people at Ira Crews and Development and Building. And we settled here in Tulsa and made Tulsa our home ever since.

JE: Your mother's and father's name?

JS: My mother's name is Sandy Stava and my dad's name is John Stava.

JE: Again, who was it that came in a covered wagon?

JS: It's my dad's mom's father.

JE: Okay.

JS: So last name Chowning. And they lived in a little pink house right next to the Piggly Wiggly in Wagoner.

JE: You grew up in schools here? Attended—

JS: Yes, I attended Jenks Public School system. The graduating class of 1987. The last class at Jenks to stay on the main campus the entirety of my time at school there. You know, they built, gosh, now I don't even know how many campuses, but my kids now—one goes to Northeast and one goes to West. Well, those were not even dreams at the time I went to Jenks. In fact, when I went to Jenks it was Betsy Mayo Kindergarten; they just took the building down a couple years ago but there were only four classrooms in the kindergarten—a.m. kindergarten and p.m. kindergarten. It was a real small school.

And then went to Baylor University and graduated in '91. Came back to Tulsa, worked for Lowrance Electronics. Then eventually I went to Wisconsin and worked for a few years for Johnson Worldwide. Then back to Tulsa where I started a company with a group of investors, Terminator Titanium Spinnerbaits.

We sold those companies and I didn't know what I was going to do with the rest of my life. And Phil Lakin, who is the CEO of the Community Foundation kept telling me I needed to come to work at the Foundation. So we had some conversations, and I took two or three months off of work and took my honeymoon, a bit of a delayed honeymoon. Then came to work at the Foundation. I thought I'd be there, you know, a year or two.

They were talking about this park project in my interview and it really kind of intrigued me, something that could be done like this.

JE: Let me come back then, you were married? And your wife's name and your children's names?

JS: My, yeah, my wife is Susie Stava. We've been married for thirteen and a half years. My oldest son, Will, turns eleven on Saturday. My youngest son, Luke, is ten years old.

JE: So your father is a major construction person.

JS: Yeah.

JE: And we see the work, we see Stava signs around town. What is it about your background that qualified you to oversee the construction of the Gathering Place?

JS: Well, my background's in operations management. I graduated from Baylor with the first, what used to be called industrial engineering, but in the late '80s they kind of changed from industrial engineer to kind of an operations management. You got all the engineering and statistics and things, but you really were from more of a business approach to building things, or to processing things. And so a lot of project management experience. That was my degree.

I came out of school and worked at Lowrance, helping them reduce inventory, which reduces the amount of money that's sitting on the floor or sitting in finished inventory. And eventually worked in the factory helping work more effectiveness of the production lines, and then worked in forecasting, which generally got me to sales where I helped oversee our larger accounts. And then from there was hired away to Johnson where I managed my own business unit, spiderwire fishing lines.

So I've always been in—my mom always said, “You're going to be in sales and marketing.” But my background is really all in operations and project management.

When I came to the Foundation, I worked on new systems for the Foundation, making us more effective at processing our grants and getting our checks out. And that was kind of my first year or two at the foundation. The idea of a park was kind of germinating and we were trying to figure out, you know, what that looked like and how big it would be, where it would be, and how much land we would have. That was the beginning part of it.

But when I interviewed it was thrown out it could be something I could work on. It wasn't like I interviewed and that was going to be my job, it was just something I was really fascinated with the idea that the Foundation would do something so big for the community. I was pretty entranced with that thought. So I just asked if I could be involved.

One of the projects I had when I first started at the Foundation was managing our real estate assets, which, you know, we had, gosh, at the time, I don't know, \$100 million worth of assets. We had this Buford property, which was the old B. B. Blair Mansion. It was bought with the full belief that we would have a park here.

As I was working at the Foundation we were just closing from Case and Associates the Sundance Apartments site directly on the southeast corner of 31st and Riverside. Mike agreed to sell it to the Foundation. And then the Legacy Apartments, which were the old Place One Apartments, which were just south of it across Crow Creek there, those apartments were in foreclosure. We were watching and waiting for those apartments to come up for sale on the courthouse steps.

Bank of Oklahoma had bought the underlying bonds but it still had to go through the bankruptcy court and then be sold publicly on the courthouse steps. That was all kind of in the first six months of my employment.

Those were our assets. We kept the apartments, case managed the Sundance Apartments and C. B. Richard Ellis was managing the Legacy Apartments for us. We had other real estate assets, building in Oklahoma City and other land in and around that we had purchased. So we were maintaining and operating all these assets and I was overseeing them. With those large land assets, when we started thinking about what we were going to do with them, I had a lot of ideas. And I think that people recognized that this was a large project to manage and it wasn't like I raised my hand and said, "I'm going to do it," but I just started doing it. That's kind of how it happened, I guess.

JE: [laughing]

Chapter 03 - 4:32

Fourteen Hundred Idea

John Erling: Well, we should point out, in the early 2000s, George Kaiser and a four-page list of Foundation priorities includes this: My emphasis is on creating attractive outdoor gathering spots along the river. There it is, right there in that short sentence.

Jeff Stava: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: We have sixty-six and a half acres along the east side of the Arkansas River. When phase two is completed, the park will occupy a hundred acres. In 2009, is when you purchased, as you were talking about, Legacy Apartments and Blair Mansion. Two thousand and ten, the request for qualification for park master plan. July 2011, Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates were hired. That was a major process, wasn't it?

JS: It was unreal. The Warren Foundation had started with a project in 2004 or 2005, the Channels project. And it really, to be honest with you, got Tulsans thinking about river development. That was really the first look. They were real serious and they really wanted a community-defining project that would bring Tulsa into the future.

Bing Thom was a part of that team and he was a master planner, landscape architect.

JE: Who Thom?

JS: Bing Thom.

JE: Okay.

JS: He came to Tulsa many times. He conceived the Channels project. After the Channels project changed and in 2007, we had a giant river vote, the donors all came together. And they were looking at these development nodes up and down the river. So it was kind of derivative of the Channels project, being an SWA out of Sausalito, California, another landscape firm, were coworking together to develop these nodes every mile up and down the river.

Based on our street grid, it's kind of natural to plan projects that are just right at the end of those, you know, as they intersect with the river. So that planning process happened and we were looking at a big private match to publicly raise money with this river vote in 2007. And it failed. I think that shook everyone to the core, because it was really a large, hundreds of millions of dollars match from the philanthropic community. Chester Cadieux had been chairman of River Parks Authority. He was the chairman of the board of the QuikTrip Corporation. Chet was the president. It was kind of a transition time and QuikTrip wanted to honor Chester, so QuikTrip Park, what everyone affectionately calls QuikTrip Park, some of the leftover money from the campaign for the river vote was used with some QuikTrip money to build that first node there at 41st Street.

JE: And Riverside, right?

JS: And Riverside. You know, Chester and Chet really believe in the river. And I can remember attending the grand opening to that and Chet talking about, "This is the front porch for Tulsans with the river." And that river parks was a really important place for Tulsans. People come to recreate there, whether they come to run or they come to picnic.

In my mind, it resonated with me about the importance of river parks. That was also in my mind when we started the planning for this park. This was the first large space along the banks of the river that people could congregate and be. That was really important for us to have that connection with the river.

JE: Here we are in 2018, we're talking about things that happened in 2010, '11. The public learns of the plans to build the Gathering Place. In 2012, first public meeting to receive public input, March 2012. That had to be an interesting time because everybody had an opinion, right?

JS: Oh, everyone has opinions and that's what makes Tulsans so great—we love our city, we want great things. The public engagement was some of the hardest periods but it was incredibly rewarding. I mean, we had fourteen-hundred-plus unique individual ideas. There were thousands of ideas total but when you consolidated them down there were fourteen individual unique ideas. We categorized them, we prioritized the, we put them in buckets, we analyzed them very hard and really folded in as many of them into the concept that we could possibly fit in.

There was crazy ones like driving ranges or football stadiums, that of course you can't do anything with. That wasn't part of what we wanted this park to be. But like the yoga lawn or access to the river's edge where we've got those lower trails. Those are all things that people wanted and so those were things we really made sure we could deliver on.

JE: That's great to know that the public had that kind of input and you took action on it.

Chapter 04 - 3:43

Blair Mansion

John Erling: Two thousand twelve, November, you announced plans for the land bridges. And I still get a thrill driving through those tunnels. [both laughing]

Jeff Stava: They're cool.

JE: I've been through tunnels in New York and in Europe but we drive through these, there's something about them that's really cool, you're right.

JS: People are fascinated with them. I always thought they were neat but I really didn't understand how iconic they could really be. Tony Moore, our park director, when we were interviewing him and he was seeing the pictures and the headwalls I think were done, but they weren't actually all complete, he said, "Jeff, this will be something that's iconic that people will think of Tulsa." He was the first one—I mean, they were neat, but I had never really felt they would be as iconic. If you never come to the park, you'll know those tunnels. We were just named one of the top new roads in North America.

JE: [laughing]

JS: I never thought we'd ever get an award like that but Tulsans are pretty proud of that.

JE: It's a tunnel. So what makes it jump out as being so special?

JS: I think the shape and I think that the land adjoining the river with the main park, that connection, those are about a hundred yards in width. When you're up on top of them you feel like you're inside the park. You don't really feel like the road is underneath you. You don't see or hear it. It's a great way to connect the main part of the park on the east side of Riverside Drive with the riverfront and the river park side on the west side of Riverside Drive.

JE: We are here in the lodge, so you're going to hear people walking around and doing some talking and so forth, so that's the sounds that you hear.

In August 2013, Williams Foundation pledges up to \$16 million to the park. That became the first major corporate donor to the park. Two thousand fourteen, the Blair Mansion that everybody had seen when they drove by, that huge lawn in front of that

mansion. And now it's hard to believe it was even there. That was demolished. That was kind of a big thing in our city life, wasn't it?

JS: It sure was. Yeah, we took it down on Super Bowl Sunday. There was a fog. George always tells me that he thinks it was planned that way, the fog. There was a misty fog, you could barely see the demo tractors that were there, the equipment to tear it down, but, yeah, it was torn down on Super Bowl Sunday. By noon, the whole house was down, and by the end of the day, it was all carted off to the landfill. We salvaged as much out of it as we possibly could but, yeah, that was a big day.

Tulsans had a connection. No one had ever been on the property, that's what was kind of interesting. But they had a connection with the big white house and the big lawn and the big grove of trees. Really an emotional attraction that I never truly understood because—

JE: Because we'd never been there.

JS: No one had ever really walked the property. We'd looked at ways to keep the house and repurpose it. It was a Jefferson Davis replica house—

JE: Right.

JS: And it just wasn't something that needed to be honored within a new park for Tulsa. Our architects really helped us think about how to repurpose it. I can remember Michael just saying the history of it, the symbolism of it, it's just not germane for what this park is going to be for Tulsa. And it, really, at that time, then crystalized our thought that it needed to go. And the Bufords were going to move it but it just became too difficult and hard and expensive and it was going to have to sacrifice a lot of trees in the route to get it to a new place. There were just too many sacrifices and too much cost. And so the decision then was that Van would take the house down.

JE: Right.

JS: He was responsible for the home at the end.

JE: The Blair Mansion was constructed by oilman B. B. Blair. Buford said it was in the early '60s that it was constructed. But Tulsa County Assessor's Office records show the structure was built in 1952, and the home was purchased by Buford, a nursing home developer, after the death of Blair's widow, Penelope Blair. The background of that mansion.

Chapter 05 - 9:30

Groundbreaking

John Erling: Then groundbreaking, September 2014, that was a delightful day.

Jeff Stava: It was unbelievable.

JE: It was a big party.

JS: We did.

JE: Many of us were there.

JS: We constructed probably the world's largest sandbox. Everything we've done has had kids at the forefront.

You asked at the very beginning about thinking about future generations and that's why the kids participated in the groundbreaking. We had little gold shovels that had the Gathering Place logo on it. Really what we wanted, the picture was not a bunch of donors with shovels, the picture was the kids.

JE: Right.

JS: And we had hundreds, hundreds, maybe thousands of kids that were in that sandbox.

JE: Yeah, yeah.

JS: Playing and they—

JE: They weren't—

JS: . . . weren't really paying attention to the talkers, the people, the speeches, the governor and the mayor. The kids were just having a ball. In fact, I can remember my youngest son came up to me at the end and he said, "Dad, you've built the best park ever, thank you!" It was a sandbox and we had fire engines and we had the taped tunnels from the children's museum and in his mind, that was it. [both laughing]

And I can remember in one of our budget meetings later, we were consternating over the enormity of the budget. And I told Jordan, I said, "Well, my son came up to me at the groundbreaking and said it was the best park ever. Maybe we just do that every weekend." [both laughing]

But in all seriousness, that day was really special.

JE: Yeah.

JS: For the first time people had been able to walk on the site. People were walking through the groves of trees. We had pictures of all the renderings that MVVA had done and we blew them up on these big boards and had them scattered throughout the site. Where the boathouse would be, we'd have a picture, and the lodge, and the playground. I can remember the stage was kind of set up on the edge of the grove of trees, which is now the west side of the playground area. There were families walking through there and looking at the picture.

And I can remember adults saying, "Oh, this is where we're going to come and play."

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JS: People started to kind of get a glimpse for what this would be, how big the site was and what the park would feel and be like that day. And that was kind of exciting.

JE: Then in November of that year, 2014, the work actually begins. Sixty-six of those acres of the one hundred acres. So where wa—

JS: The day after the groundbreaking we started putting fence up. Then we started doing all of our conservation work, all of our silt fences and things, but, yes, dirt work move started just right after that.

JE: What was the first project?

JS: All the underground utility work. The city came in and started all the storm water work. We had storm water work on the south end off of 30th Street. Behind there a new storm water ran all the way up in Travis Park, the neighborhood here right behind. We had a new storm water connection made underneath the Midland Valley Trail. And then along the north end we had a storm water overflow, storm water from Swan Lake and Creek, which runs kind of underneath North Maple Ridge.

So those two projects started just quite literally right after groundbreaking. And then all of our site utility work began. You have to remember, this site was about as flat as a dinner plate.

JE: Yeah.

JS: I mean, it slopes slightly to the south for drainage. But when you look at the topographical changes when you're on site basically everything from the grove of trees over here on the western side of the playground, that's the original grade. Everything that's below that has been cut out and everything that is above that grade is an add. And there's a 450,000 cubic yards of material moved on this site. So basically for two and a half, three years, that's all that happened was dirt work and underground utility work; all the storm water and drainage. And then we've got twenty-six miles of electric and fiber running underground that people really don't realize. I mean, there's just a lot of underground work, and that was all happening in those early years.

I'd bring people out and it was just brown dirt everywhere. I mean, that was really all it was. And we moved 250,000 cubic yards of material out of the river. That's basically the pond area was the cutting area to build the highest point, which is behind the boathouse. And then we took a lot of material out of the river as well.

JE: That was a long drudgery, [both laughing] wasn't it?

JS: That was, yeah.

JE: I bet you were anxious to start doing something above ground.

JS: I, yeah, I ruined a lot of loafers and slacks with dirt stains. Yeah, it was a lot of dirt work.

JE: Did vegetation come in first, one of the first?

JS: So we—

JE: I bring that up because my first visit the vegetation looks like it's been here for fifty, sixty, seventy years. It was amazing.

JS: One of the very other first things we did was hire Bill Preaus, who's a local arborist. He categorized every tree on the property, determined its health. Michael Van Valkenburgh

and Associates then took that data base and then the most healthy, strongest, largest trees were all identified. And then literally we designed the playground inside of the parameter of the trees.

Bill was kind of our custodian of all of our trees throughout the process. He was onsite during the entire part of the construction. There's about six hundred trees that were kept. We built these huge fences around them and we put in oyster emulsion mixed with wood chips that would seep into the ground to keep these trees preserved during construction and keep people from driving on the roots. You know, that's why they lasted through construction.

We had a lot of winds and we lost some trees, because when we started thinning the woods a lot of those trees protected each other. And when you took the older trees or the dead trees or the ones that were rotted or the ones that weren't going to have a long life, then we had some that fell over in the winds. But Bill, he managed keeping all those trees.

Then Michael and his team, I mean, the brilliance of their designs are just the intensity and purposefulness of tree placement and the types of trees. And then, you know, there's 1.2 million shrubs, bushes, plants throughout the site. And then we planted nearly 6,000—5,789 trees.

So when you think about all that and the landscape is so new right now, it's in its very infancy. So every year I'm kind of excited about spring because the trees are going to be growing and things are going to be thickening in. Really, you'll develop more landscaped rooms, which is Michael's intent, places that are kind of smaller within the park, to create those memories and those things. And that's kind of exciting.

JE: Any idea how old some of those trees are that are on the grounds?

JS: Well, the largest, oldest tree is the Reading Tree, which is over here on what I call the corner of the park next to the playground. The Reading Tree is an old cottonwood tree and that's oldest, largest tree. I don't know exactly how old it is but it will be there for generations to come. And it's programmed and we have people reading to kids every single day. We'll have anywhere from fifty to two hundred kids here to read under the tree, or now that it's cold, or in the lodge. But the trees are a real important part.

JE: So many varieties that you brought in—

JS: A hundred and eighteen different species of trees we brought in. Deciduous trees and then evergreen trees, so you have color in the fall and winter and then you, of course, have the flowering trees and beauty that you'd have in the spring. And then, of course, summertime all the greenery.

JE: Where do those trees come from?

JS: All over the United States. As far north as upper state New York, Carolinas, Tennessee. A lot of trees too, a good half of them came from Edmond, you know, from Oklahoma too. But we have trees from all over.

JE: Yeah. Magnolias, one of our favorites.

JS: Magnolias, yeah. Which, you know, Michael was always shocked at how big and, you know, magnolias are really not a tree that should grow in Tulsa, Oklahoma, but it really was something we talked a lot about. But, yeah, they're beautiful and we have a lot of them planted here.

JE: Dead trees you repurposed—

JS: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: . . . and you made benches. Tell us what you did with those trees.

JS: We have pieces in the playground that are upside down trees. That's a fun story too because that inspiration came from a project. An artist had done a project in Oklahoma City at Marriott Gardens, and when we were touring through there I took a picture. We were talking about art for the park with Michael. There was an artist who had literally taken a small tree and had taken all the bark off of it, had taken all the dirt off the root ball and you could see the root ball, the trunk, and then the branches. And it was an art piece. I took a picture, kind of tongue in cheek and sent it to Michael and team and said, "Is this the kind of natural art we should be looking at?"

Believe it or not, it sparked ideas for them. They were designing Maggie Daley Park and they were in construction. They were grappling with some trees that had been honoring cancer survivors, and their Park Department wanted those trees reused. That was happening at the same time I sent this picture.

JE: In?

JS: In Chicago.

JE: In Chicago.

JS: At Maggie Daley Park.

JE: Right.

JS: Just right next to Millennium Park. And what was funny about that was they decided to strip the bark off, preserve the trees, and turn them upside down as art pieces. So the very first ones, that was kind of an inspiration from this artist picture that I had taken in Oklahoma City.

And then we saw them in there and we loved them. So we took some of the larger trees here, which we had much larger more healthy trees, a chainsaw artist here in Tulsa helped us with preserving them. Bill Preaus identified the ones that were the most structurally sound ones. We built a metal shed where we stored the ones that were the heaviest. We had some that were two and a half tons. In fact, one of our family pictures is taken on that. But we stored them there and then Bill stored some at his yard. We dried them all out and then we preserved them and turned them upside down in the playground area.

We've used them, like you said, for benches, we have play pieces, little boats that were made. We had tons of benches, all the benches in the outdoor classroom and the playground, all those benches are from recycled, reclaimed trees. We used as many as we possibly could to help the park.

JE: Yeah.

Chapter 06 - 7:52

City Changing Park

John Erling: So vegetation comes in early stages, but rock work also came in early, I believe.

Jeff Stava: Rock work was, well, the Four Seasons Garden, which is the connectionary between 31st and up to behind the boathouse, that was the longest timeline of construction. We finished the last rock work about four or five weeks before we opened the park. We were literally still doing landscaping and finishing all the landscaping all the way up to the very end. That was the very last part of the entire project that was done before we opened.

JE: Okay, about these rocks and stones and all, where did they come in from?

JS: All Oklahoma, every piece of rock in this entire park came from the state of Oklahoma. In southern Oklahoma there's four quarries that we received rock from. Even the aggregate that's inside the sidewalk all came from below the dam at Tenkiller, down in southeastern Oklahoma.

Bluebird Quarry was our processor. They built a huge plant, the owner did, to cut all of the tiles of the floor here in the lodge. All the rock work was processed through there. The rock work is pretty fascinating in the sense that it's not a typical project where the mason is constructing and he just takes a stone and places it. Every one of these stones, whether it was on the building or in the landscape, had a part number, it had a coloration, it had a thickness, it had a size, it was all designed and engineered and had its own part number. In fact, I still see part numbers on some of the rocks but we power-washed them all. But each one had its own shop drawing, each one of them was pulled out of the quarry. It had to be a certain things, it had to be a certain coloration and then cut a certain way, and then delivered to site in order of how they were built.

So these walls here in the lodge took anywhere from three to six months to build.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

JS: Landscape walls all in through the Wetland Garden area, that was some of the first rock work that actually was done. Some of those rocks are two tons. The installers, they literally

had to crane every stone into place two or three times to get it set, sized, and positioned. So it was a really time consuming process.

JE: You stacked a lot of these stones. I'm looking right outside here at the stacking of the stones, that in itself was a major project.

JS: Yes, this large landscape the building looks like it sits on was just almost six months to build that entire wall. Keep in mind too that when we built it we had to take stones off. Things didn't happen the way we wanted and we made changes as we went. But the architects were watching through face time and through pictures and then onsite visits kind of managing how it looks.

Even though they draw things out, in our contracts with our subs we had abilities to make changes. Like the ceiling in the lodge here. There's a ten-foot strip that was taken down and put back up three or four times.

JE: This strip that we're looking at?

JS: Uh, yeah, this main strip right here. The orientation of the wood or the way the spacing worked. We were constantly adjusting and improving. Then when we finally got it we were able to start building the rest of the ceiling. But the architects were here every single week to make sure that the ceiling looked like it does today. It's just an actual masterpiece.

Everything here had drawings but everything here was managed, as it was put in, by the architects. MSME did the ceiling in the buildings and MVVA did the park. Their attention to detail, I've just never seen anything like it, it's why it's such a special place.

JE: Right. As we're in here, the lodge, people are coming in, they've probably brought in some donuts and coffee and they're just sitting here looking out at this great view that you and I are looking at.

JS: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: It's kind of neat how people are taking time to do that.

JS: Yes. I think probably the most rewarding thing is watching people in the park. I was out here so much with the construction workers. You know, we had at the high point seven hundred people here onsite working, but the most rewarding part of this project has been coming and walking through the park and just seeing people having fun. Kids in the playground laughing and screaming and playing, and even the simpleness of the seating in here, and people looking out, and having a peaceful moment.

Someone said that it's like having a vacation in Tulsa. You just don't even feel like you're in Tulsa.

JE: What are we looking out over here?

JS: Well, you're looking out over Peggy's Pond. It's a little smaller than three acres of this pond that runs through the center part of the site. Then you're out looking at Mist Mountain, which is the water feature. It's winterized now but the water feature and these large

landscape stone walls and pathway up to the top of the water feature. And then the Wetland Garden area here on the north you can see.

In the wintertime, everything kind of fades and the trees, of course, lose their leaves and so you can see through everything. You have much better views in the wintertime. But when spring comes, the trees thicken up and the leaves and it'll be hard to see out as far as you do today.

JE: I came here maybe about a month ago, came into the lodge, there were about five ladies sitting there knitting. Isn't that cool?

JS: Yeah.

JE: There they were, looking out at what you're looking at. And then just came in, "Well, where are we going to knit? Let's go to the lodge."

JS: [laughing] This game table that we're sitting at to do the interview, my kids love to sit and play chess. Of course they have to have our driver's license to get the chess pieces but they run down and get the chess pieces and they love to play chess.

But you see people checking their email, you know. They may be remote workers. We have someone in the solarium that's got a business meeting, they all came in. People are finding ways to use the park that aren't really traditional park uses. They're finding ways to make this part of their life. And I think that will just continue for years to come.

JE: Were there ideas you had to absolutely abandon? Were there any that you said, "You know what, that was a great idea but it's not going to work"?

JS: There really weren't. I mean, we had, in the beginning, a lot of ideas. We ran out of space. But Michael and his team, how they look at programming and how they look at what you would consider active use or passive use within the park, that was something that the Foundation also felt was very important. We visited, gosh, twenty-plus parks across the United States. Tulsans, we kind of take our land and our parks for granted. We have a lot of them. We're very, very fortunate.

When you go to large cities on the coast, particularly, their parks are not as expansive but they're super actively programmed. So that was something that was going to be different about the Gathering Place, that we wanted the programming to embrace and engage people in a way that they had not been before.

Tony and his team, just in our hundred days of opening, we've gotten Tulsans from all over our city to this park. And we wanted it to be a park for everyone.

So Michael and his team concentrated on helping us make sure that we had active park space and active programming.

But we didn't have anything that we really scrapped. We did a lot of design work. We probably spent the most amount of time on the playground design. It took us a long time to get to this final design. And we sacrificed certain things out of it.

But one of the things I didn't want that I remembered through the RP process when we walk, architects would say things like, "Well, we were going to do this but we couldn't do that." And, "Gosh, we wish we had done this, it was originally planned this way but we couldn't get it done."

I told our architects, MVVA, I said, "I don't want any regrets. I never want you to be able to walk through the park and say, "Oh man, if you had only seen my original concept." I didn't want regrets. And our board, we talked a lot about this. I told them, "We want this to be a city-changing park." That's what we set out for, that's what our donors expected.

When we got the donation, the \$60 million from Williams, Alan Armstrong wanted a place that he could attract and retain top talent. And that came from One Oak, when they made their commitment, and QuikTrip. These companies need bright talent; they have to have city amenities that they can attract and retain these folks.

So when we looked at the design we didn't want any regrets. We did that for our donors, we did that for our board, we wanted it to be something different and something special.

Chapter 07 - 8:25

The Lodge

John Erling: After the architect's plan was set, you agreed to it, and you start working on the project, did any ideas come along as you were in the middle of it, and say, "Oh, we hadn't thought about that one but maybe we should pursue it"?

Jeff Stava: [laughing] Oh, a lot. We really fell in love with the cut stone. You know, when you cut the stone and you just basically see all the layers of the sandstone and how the molten rock is formed, you can see it on the lodge floor. And you can see it in all the stone within the park.

In the playground area, you'll see we've flipped the cut pieces with the natural faces. That was all done as we were building, that wasn't something we originally designed or thought of. We made a lot of improvements and enhancements to the playground, all the way up to when we placed the orders. And we're still working on our punch list and change on them. We have four thousand items on our punch list. We had a lot of change orders that had cost to it, like tweaks and improvements and finishing details that were never in the plans that we're doing now. So . . .

JE: You've had international inquiries about this, haven't you?

JS: Oh, I, we field calls from all—in fact, today, I'm giving a tour to the Dallas Parks Department. Their parks' director and his team are coming for a tour and discussion about the park.

JE: But other countries?

JS: Oh, yes, we've had people from all over the world. We've had articles, we've had internet postings. I mean, the *New York Times*, in August, did a huge piece that really has caused a lot of acclaim to Tulsa and to the park.

JE: Riverside Drive is closed for reconstruction July 2015, and oh, how we all anticipated the opening of that.

JS: [laughing]

JE: And so much traffic went on Peoria. Tulsans were willing to go along with this but we were getting anxious, weren't we?

JS: We were.

JE: We wanted it open. I can always remember when that was open, I could bike through here now and all that. So that was a thrill. But we earned it, didn't we?

JS: We did. Yeah. That was really hard. Shutting the roadway down, it was difficult for people to, to change their commuter habit, especially when there was construction on 75, they had to do some resurfacing and we always had a front-page story about being inconvenienced and shutting Riverside Drive down. But I will tell you that I think everyone agrees it was worth it.

JE: It is.

JS: You don't hear anyone complaining anymore. And that's another thing that was really pretty shocking to me, you know. We had been doing stories all through the construction of how neat it was going to be. We paraded all the large playground towers through Tulsa. I thought you would have people come and say, "Well, it's a neat park." But even with all the hype and all the excitement, people come onto the site and they're just floored at how much better it was than they even imagined.

JE: Oh, yeah.

JS: I hear that constantly. That's incredibly rewarding and that's just a testament to the creativeness of our architects.

JE: Let's talk about some of the specific projects and the challenges you've faced. We've already talked some about Williams Lodge; this was constructed with boulders weighing several tons?

JS: Oh, yeah.

JE: Boulders, tons.

JS: Yeah, tons.

JE: Let's go back to the kind of equipment that could move that kind of weight.

JS: Huge dump trucks, you know, we had mining dump trucks that aren't even permitted for roadway use that moved all of the dirt. And we had huge excavators and bulldozers, everything with GPS, all of the landscape CAD systems and elevations were all

preprogrammed in the dozers and the excavators. We had to work very closely with the Army Corps of Engineers and Southwest Power, who manages the Keystone Dam, to get in and out of the river.

Remember the day we broke ground we had had a drought for the previous five or six or seven years, and the day we broke ground, from there through construction, we had some of the wettest springs and summers. So we were constantly battling the river. We had it in the back of our minds but with all that drought we felt like we had clearance to get in and out. So we had a lot of coordination with that.

The equipment was unbelievable, the number of workers onsite, every building, I mean, even this lodge, you do not see one column inside the lodge holding the ceiling up. Each one of these mullions are solid steel. Each one of them is a structural component to holding the roof up. It also holds the glass up so there's not a glass curtain wall, it's actually integrated to the structure. So even this building is an architectural marvel, in and of itself.

JE: That's hard to imagine. Those thin posts—

JS: Steel pieces.

JE: I'm going to call them posts.

JS: Yeah. [both laughing]

JE: In addition to holding the glass or holding—

JS: The ceiling.

JE: And so why, why have we had these places with these huge round pillars to do that?

JS: It's—

JE: Modern technology allowed that to happen.

JS: Yes, and engineering. [laughing]

JE: Engineering, right.

JS: Yeah, to even this building.

JE: And then the stone walls were put in it. The building actually wrapped around the stone walls, isn't that the way that happened?

JS: Um, that's right. All the concrete was poured, the stone was then put on it, and then the building kind of rose up and out of the ground. This is actually a two-story building. You know, when you drive in it looks like a really nice little pleasant one-story building, but there's a walk-out basement area that's got the ice cream shop, candy shop, and equipment rental area. And then you've got all the open space on the first level for, like this, we're in the Gathering Room. There's gathering places all throughout the site.

Some of my favorite is the little round gathering nodes up on Swing Hill behind the boathouse. We found those and Günter, who's a playground designer for Richter, we went to his house and he had a hundred or so acres that he had little playground pieces and things scattered about; he's constantly tinkering and designing. He had these little gathering areas. We had a little design meeting talking about the playground.

And I was like, “Man, these are so cool.” We’re all sitting in a circle, those were made out of fiberglass, they come up behind your ears. The acoustics were really good and we had them built in stone form by Richter. Bible studies and book clubs meet up there and people are finding uses. Or the log play structure that’s there up on Swing Hill.

There was a children’s home in the foothills of the Swiss Alps there in Bavaria, Southern Germany, and every time I went to visit Richter, kids were on it. Older kids were sitting across from each other, they were all talking and laughing and the younger kids were all playing on it. Even in a sleet storm the kids were out there, older kids sitting and younger kids playing, and we’ve got to have that at the Gathering Place. It’s the epitome of gathering for kids. And so that’s why that structure’s there.

Everywhere you look there’s places for people to be and to gather. That was the lens that we used for a lot of the design.

JE: I think it’s great that you traveled elsewhere and out of the country and you saw an idea that’s working and brought it back.

JS: Totally.

JE: And to see that in action.

To finish up here on the lodge, the ceiling, how many species of wood are up there on that ceiling?

JS: There are nine different species of wood and eighteen different formats. Some of them are box, some of them are on end, some of them are planked, and you can see all different patterns. Yeah, it’s pretty amazing.

JE: It is, and—

JS: And it took a long time to pick all the species of wood. We had a lot more darker species initially than we had lighter species. And we built the ceiling in the construction office over there at 31st and Riverside, Boston Place. In fact, the ceiling’s still up in there. We have high ceilings and we have the wall and the angled up ceiling. And we tinkered with the species of wood and the coloration a lot. We spent a lot of time on it. And even in practice here when we actually built it.

JE: The—

JS: Wood Systems built this, it’s a Mill Creek company, unbelievable.

JE: How long do you think it took to put in that ceiling?

JS: The entire ceiling took roughly three months.

JE: Wow.

JS: Two and a half, three months.

JE: Yeah. The floor is sandstone, right?

JS: Yes, it’s called Wild Horse Swirl. This floor, when we first conceptualized it the tiles were four or five feet by six feet, they were huge, and the cost to cut, transport, lay was through the

roof. We went through many iterations to come up with the tile sizes and orientation and the coloration of the stone. There were two different places near Poteau where they were pulling the stone. One had kind of a peachy color. Then we had to stain it, so it's got what I call high definition, because when you see the raw stone and then you see the enhancer to it, which is the HD affect, and then the sealer, it really changes the coloration and tone and feel of the stone floor.

We had George and our board and some of our staff looking and thinking and looking at all different types of samples, I can remember, to pick this coloration. But it's pretty true to what the original sample that we got when we started the process.

JE: Yes.

JS: Mac and Merrell were very passionate about grout colors and stain colors, but we all worked together to make what it looks like today.

Chapter 08 - 8:52

Blue Herons and Paddle Fish

John Erling: Did you ever think, *This is going so slow, this process. We've got a committee picking colors and all that?* And it had to be trying sometimes.

Jeff Stava: [laughing] Yeah, it was. I kind of liken my position, two things, an executor, which is taking concepts and ideas and then getting it built, but also the crews director. We had a couple hundred people, consultants, engineers, architects, and contractors that were engaged in managing the construction. Then you had seven hundred workers that were executing in the field. And then you had a board of directors, you had George, and so a crews director trying to keep everyone happy and working together. And then making decisions, because you have to keep the whole thing on task, but we had an unbelievable team. The brilliance of the architects, the contractor being able to take those ideas and get it built, George having the vision, our board having the vision, when you look at it, we really did have the dream team to get this accomplished.

We had a lot of city work that was done. Leadership there was extraordinary from the mayors. We had two mayors that the project was built under. And then the Public Works director and all of the Public Works people, I mean, everyone worked together to make this happen for our city.

JE: Right. Another place to visit, the Land of the River Giants.

JS: Yeah.

JE: And the wildlife indigenous to the Arkansas River. Speak about that.

JS: Monstrum, in Copenhagen, a really creative playground manufacturer, this guy created these little playhouses for their kids' nursery school. That's how the business started. And he's in a little twenty thousand square foot warehouse where he had these carpenters. You can see the creativeness of the pieces we have. We were trying to come up with ideas. They had built these really large northern pike—we went to Sweden and actually looked at some of the pikes, and they have pikes in the waters there.

Here, we were kind of thinking of a bass or a catfish.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JS: But the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife had found these prehistoric paddle fish that they did not think were still in the Arkansas River. They found a hole up by I-44, like, a hundred feet deep, and they put a camera in it and there were literally hundreds, if not thousands, of these old paddle fish, and they had no idea. This happened right in the same year that we were trying to figure out what kind of play pieces we were going to have.

The paddle fish, it just kind of hit us, wouldn't it be cool? And the architects immediately took those videos that we had and we sent them to the folks at Monstrum and they came up with the paddle fish that is there.

The blue herons, of course, you can't go anywhere in ponds or rivers or lakes here in Oklahoma without seeing a blue heron. So the blue herons and the paddle fish, they're on the coffee mugs downstairs and on our water bottles, they've become the iconic pieces of the park. In fact, Blue, the blue heron, is one of our mascots. The kids just love him, but even the adults.

Again, the architects and the playground designers really did a great job of making this park Tulsa's park.

JE: And Oklahoma's park.

JS: And Oklahoma's park, yeah, totally.

JE: I mean, the material came from across the state of Oklahoma. The Royal Tower is kind of a big deal, isn't it?

JS: Oh, yeah, that's the tallest structure—the kids love it. They can go to the top. The rope bridges, the swinging bridges, there's a lot of parts to the playground the kids just absolutely love.

JE: You've alluded to this, I think, but is it true 350 pieces of equipment from Germany?

JS: Yeah, from southern Germany, Frasdorf, Germany, from Copenhagen and the Netherlands. All of the skywalk forest is all German. Compan designed and built that equipment and some of the play pods that are along the banks of the Arkansas River are Compan equipment too.

JE: Timber from the Alps for the wooden play accessories.

JS: That's right, the Black Forest.

JE: What's the name of that company, I can't pronounce it?

JS: Richter.

JE: Richter what?

JS: Spielgeräte.

JE: Spielgeräte?

JS: Spielgeräte, yeah.

JE: How did you get connected to them?

JS: Michael Van Valkenburgh and Associates had used them on the Brooklyn Bridge Park, the playgrounds there. I think it was the first time they used them. And then Maggie Daley Park they built two towers. This is the largest installation of Richter equipment in the world. It's also the largest installation of Monstrum equipment too. And it's the first installation of their equipment in the US. So there's a lot of firsts from the playground equipment.

Playground, yeah, I would say it's the heart of the park. It occupies five acres. We built Guthrie Green downtown, it's a performance music park. It's in the art district, it's in the Heritage of Canes and The Old Lady on Brady or what's now the Tulsa Auditorium. And the Gathering Place is a park for families. So the playground really was the centerpiece of design and things just kind of emanated from it.

The boathouse with the kids programming and adult programming, and then the play pods along the banks of the Arkansas River, the skate park, the BMX, all those things. People wanted stuff for older kids, there wasn't enough. You go and look and there's kids from all over our city in those areas, in those sport courts on the far south end.

The playgrounds are really truly the heart of the park.

JE: So that part of the concept is working. I know George Kaiser wanted to bring people together from all races and backgrounds, economic levels. And you see that happening, from what you just talked about, don't you?

JS: Through design and through programming.

JE: Yeah.

JS: It was kind of a theory, it was an objective, and then it was a theory of design. And you never really know if it's going to happen, but from the day it opened, in these first hundred days, it really is bringing all walks of life in our city together. And that was really the driving goal for the park.

JE: Yeah. The Wetland Gardens at the north end of Peggy's Pond—

JS: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: . . . boating, fishing, wildlife habitat observation. First of all, let's clarify, which Peggy are we talking about when we say Peggy's Pond?

JS: Peggy Stephenson. Peggy and Charlie Stephenson were one of our very early park supporters. They just embraced this design and the aesthetics, the architecture, the

concept of play and bringing our community together. And they were one of our earliest ardent supporters. Charlie wanted to honor his wife by naming the pond after her, so that's why it's called Peggy's Pond.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative). What kind of wildlife are we seeing in Peggy's Pond? Where did it come from?

JS: Well, there's wild grasses and flowers that ensconce the whole Wetland area and north of pond area. After we had opened, there were thousands of monarch butterflies here in the park. I took a picture and posted it on social media. There were thousands of monarch butterflies all along the banks of the pond. Birds, frogs, we have so much wildlife in just the first hundred days that have come back into the park after construction. Birds, the bald eagles. Chip West, one of our horticulturalists has been taking pictures of the different birds we see.

I think as time goes you're just going to have a lot more wildlife coming back in and throughout the park.

The other thing that I was fascinated with during construction, we had talked for about twenty years about access to the river's edge and getting down to the river's edge and having exposure to the river's edge with our parks. The Gathering Place delivered on that promise. The migratory water fowl, the thousands of ducks that will settle on the pond at night and then take off in the morning, and the eagles up and down the river, there's just a lot of wildlife.

And I think a lot of our programming and our wildlife and conservation attention will really engage the youngest and oldest to see what's going on up and down this river corridor.

JE: That pond, you created it?

JS: Yeah, the pond is manmade.

JE: You dug it out? You dug it out?

JS: That's right.

JE: How is it fed?

JS: It's a very interesting story, it has nine underground water wells that run on the south and eastern edge of the park. All of that water then comes out of those nine wells into the pump room that's underneath the water play area in the playground, and then pushed into the pond. Then it's pumped from the north end of the pond up to the two cisterns in the Wetland Garden, and then it is naturally purified through the swales and the cisterns, settling out all the heavy chemicals and sediment within the water and then pushed into the pond. Then the pond water is used to irrigate the entire site. It's actually a functioning irrigation system holding tank. It's manmade, it was dug out.

Another thing we found, you know, I can remember when we purchased the house from Dan Buford he had a basement in the house and talked about the water being in

there, even when it didn't rain he would have some water. Well, when we were digging out this area on kind of the west side of the lodge, we came across a spring. We took a four-inch PVC and threw it to the pond, it's actually located over here on the west side of the lodge. We thought it would run out but it has been running constantly since we tapped it. So that water goes into the pond. It doesn't fill the pond completely but there is spring water that comes out and goes straight into the pond.

It's kind of an interesting—

JE: I'm, I'm curious—

JS: . . . tidbit, we had no idea about the spring underneath.

JE: I'm curious where that is then. There's a spring beneath all of this?

JS: A spring beneath the park, beneath the lodge building here.

JE: It's just naturally there?

JS: That's right, and we have it emptying out into the pond. But the pond comes from all of the wells that we've dug, and that's where the water comes from.

Chapter 09 - 7:00

Sports Courts

John Erling: The King Post Bridge spanning the water called The Narrows. Talk about the bridge logs and decking. And where that wood comes from.

Jeff Stava: All of the wood bridges, kind of a signature for Michael and MVVA as the natural wood. It runs from the playground, through our bridge work. Trillium is the company that actually put it together but the wood is all treated. The design was Michael's design and MVVA's design with HNTBR Engineer. It's not a very typical bridge design, it's very atypical. In fact, I think it's the first King Post Bridge that we actually have in the state, and probably the region.

Then also the wooden bridges that are linking over by Swing Hill and the bridge that we have in the playground area, the Caterpillar Bridge, which looks like little caterpillar legs. All solid wood bridge. But that's kind of a signature for Michael.

JE: And that wood comes from Oregon and Washington?

JS: Yeah, all the northwest.

JE: It's a Douglas fir?

JS: All from the northwest.

JE: Yeah.

JS: And then it's treated to last a thirty- to fifty-year life if properly maintained.

JE: You've got almost twelve miles of decking material out there?

JS: [laughs] Yeah. That's a fact I didn't even remember. [laughing]

JE: Right. The QuikTrip Lawn, Great Lawn and the Lake View Lawn, it can accommodate five to six thousand people?

JS: We had over eight thousand for The Roots on opening day.

JE: Wow.

JS: People were everywhere. The playground was packed, I mean, we probably had nearly twenty thousand people onsite for that concert. Kids were still playing while The Roots were playing, you know. It was kind of an incredible day.

We were always worried about how many people the park could hold. It can just hold so many more people than we ever imagined. The capacity of the Great Lawn is huge. I think it'll be a center point for a lot of great entertainment for Tulsans.

JE: Now this is kind of like a Central Park. Garth Brooks has appeared in Central Park.

JS: [laughing] When we designed it we asked the designers both for Lake View and here that we would run enough power and sound and video capability to be able to have that kind of concert. And we've got it both on the Lake View Lawn, which hasn't been finished yet. That will be finished after the new Pedestrian Gateway Bridge is installed and the new dam is put in. We'll start construction in early 2020, late 2019, and it'll finish up in 2021. The Lake View Lawn will open but they've got huge underground vaults that have the power that we can roll our stages out and power and do all the sound and things.

It was kind of the inspiration of Garth Brooks at Central Park, having that type of concert, we wanted to have that capability here.

JE: You think you could do that?

JS: We sure could.

JE: Garth Brooks?

JS: Oh, I don't—[laughing] he's Oklahoman. You—

JE: I'm just saying in the concept—

JS: You can have big concerts, you can have televised worldwide, we have all the capability to do that with our infrastructure here. Cox Communications with our internet, PSO, and One Gas with all of our natural gas. We have all the infrastructure needed to be able to power a concert like that.

JE: That was forward thinking, because some major star—

JS: You could do that.

JE: . . . will make a performance out here. No doubt.

JS: That's what we would love.

JE: Bike parks, skate parks, sports courts. The courts are inspired, I think, by some of your trips to Europe?

JS: The sport courts are. When I was a kid out of college, in Europe they have these multisport courts everywhere. They actually have these packages you buy and we couldn't get them in the US. And we showed pictures, I had a bunch of pictures that we gave the designers. We actually built the first ones here, the Foundation did, in Kendall Whittier, over by the Educare building that we have there.

Basketball, tennis, and street soccer were the three sports. Basketball and street soccer, that's what they play in Kendall Whittier. Those we actually built. We had the fence company build the little box for the goal. We cobbled it together ourselves.

We were going to do the same thing here and that's what we did at the Gathering Place too, but then the European folks were like, "Hey, we'll sell you these kits." But we had already gotten so far along in our design.

But, yeah, we have street hockey, basketball, lacrosse, and volleyball. We've actually already had some high school volleyball games here and we've had, I think, high school women's basketball tournament game here. So they're getting used by the schools, but also the pickup games are huge. It's kind of cool because you'll have adults doing a pickup game and some kids will come and they'll invite the kids to play with them. So it's people, really, all ages playing together—that was kind of the goal. It's fun to watch.

JE: We hear the term "melting pot" but that's what's happening right there.

JS: Totally.

JE: Right.

JS: The other thing I think is fun is you don't see people on their phones. You might see them taking pictures of their kids. I think it has to do with the design, I think it has to do with just how cool everything is. Parents and grandparents are engaged with their kids and their families, and you just don't see people on their phones.

The mayor actually was the one that noticed that and I've just constantly been watching it. People are engaged with each other, which, again, is the purpose of what the Gathering Place is about.

JE: We should say for the record, that's Mayor G. T. Bynum, who is the present mayor here in 2018.

About Central Park, has anybody from Central Park been curious about what you guys are doing out here?

JS: I haven't had anyone from Central Park come.

JE: Okay.

JS: We looked at them. We looked at what was there.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JS: We went all over the US looking at parks. Interviewed with the Chicago Parks Department, Hudson River Park System in New York, Battery City Park System, which had a really unbelievable program director and program. A lot of ideas came from them, and Balboa Park in San Diego. We've just been all over. And took little pieces of ideas.

The other places we went that we had a lot of inspiration from were children's museums. The Sensory Garden in the playground and the Water Play, really are derivatives of children's museums out of other play areas. We took ideas from all over.

JE: The power poles, we see those—

JS: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: ... tell the folks the function of those power poles. Why do we have those in that sports area?

JS: So it's an aesthetic, instead of chain link or typical metal poles, all of our poles on the whole site are wood. In the formal areas of the park you have what I call the "dressed" poles, which are the tall ones. The forty-five-foot ones are from France. The shorter ones were built in Kansas City. They're made to match but they're made in different places. The tall power poles around the sport courts and the BMX pump track and the skate park, those are all just like a telephone pole or a power pole. Those hold up all of our light systems around all of those areas, all LED lights.

On the skate park and BMX pump track, because the topography of the concrete and undulation, you have to get the same amount of light in all areas. You can't have casted shadows, not so that's it's safe. There's a lot of poles over there to hold all those light systems to balance the light across the surfaces of the skate park.

JE: And it holds up some netting between courts and that type of thing.

JS: Yeah, it holds up all the German netting. That netting, we saw a lot of that in Germany, they use that to hold in soccer balls around their sports courts and such. But, again, we wanted the details to be different than anything people had seen. We could have just put chain link and regular poles, but we wanted it to be unique and different. But, yeah, it also holds the netting and the large gates around those areas.

Chapter 10 - 7:00

Most Difficult Projects

John Erling: At this point, phase two has now been completed. Does that include Children's Museum that you're talking about?

Jeff Stava: So the Children's Museum will be on the very south end, it bookends the south end of the site. We're right now conceptualizing, we've got two or three different ideas for the phase two, and kind of what we call phase three on the south end of Crow Creek. But the Children's Museum is there and then trying to decide how much park. We're looking at what's successful, what are we missing? On the main part we're seeing how people are interacting with it, we'll be studying that for the next year. Then we'll be looking at what that phase two and phase three looks like and feels like.

JE: So in 2018, how many years out are we for that phase two?

JS: Probably three years out from starting construction, maybe two years. We have a lot of ideas right now, just on the first hundred days, what that will look like. But right now using it for temporary parking.

JE: Concept in progress then apparently, at this point.

JS: Yes.

JE: It seems like I could ask you about any little thing and you've got a story to add to it.

JS: [laughing]

JE: Is there some that I'm missing that you'd say, "I'd like to talk about such and such," that I haven't even touched on here?

JS: People always ask what the hardest engineering or construction parts were. I always find that a fascinating question because not everything is just as easy as planting a tree. There are three things that were really hard to design and build. The roof on the boathouse, the headwalls for the land bridges, and the fireplace that's right behind me. Those were the three most difficult to design or build.

I'll real quickly tell you that the boathouse roof was going to be a fabric roof like the Denver International Airport or our arrivals area here at the Tulsa International Airport. And we had straight-line seventy-six miles an hour winds about five years ago, right in the middle of the design. We had just finished the design and that was the highest clocked wind speed in Tulsa. It took trees and power poles down, if you remember. It was in a July timeframe.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JS: That fabric roof could never have withstood seventy-six miles an hour straight-line winds. So we went back to the drawing board and came up with those composite fiberglass panels system. The design of it and constructing it and getting them all put together and assembled, every part of that from design all the way through to construction was pretty difficult.

The headwalls are a compound angle on the faces of those headwalls. When you pour concrete, it would fill up the form and come up the face of the form and they had little bubbles. But we had expansion joint issues, the engineers took an extra three months to redesign the expansion joint systems. We had a set of forms we had to use, two sets that we used four times. So the headwalls were something that were difficult to engineer and difficult to build.

Then the fireplace. It's an oval shape.

JE: Yeah.

JS: And it goes from the ground all the way up. We had people telling us it couldn't be built, but we had a company, Unique Metals, out of Kansas, these guys came down and they had such a can-do attitude about trying to figure out how to make it work with the architects. And they were able to get it built. The metal structure inside this is almost a building into and of itself. It's a—

JE: We only see a portion of it.

JS: And you only see a portion of it but you can walk into it and it's this whole system. But the metalwork that's inside holding that up, I mean, it's quite, quite astounding.

But those were the three most difficult to design and build on the park.

JE: You didn't just build a park and say, "Here, use it." You referred to programming several times. That's real crucial to the park's use. We have to give you ways to use it, ideas to use it. That obviously continues on as long as this park is open. Talk to us about that.

JS: That's the purpose. And I always tell people, you know, "As beautiful as it is—

JE: Yeah.

JS: "... and it is, it's astounding, and it's only going to get more beautiful as time goes on." And this young landscape grows up into a mature landscape, it's just going to make it an even more special place. The—

JE: But you're creating events.

JS: It's breathing the life into the park.

JE: There you go.

JS: And we got that inspiration from the coasts. You have to think about the way big cities use parks. You know, people have apartments or condominiums or townhouses and they don't have yards, they don't have front yards and back yards. As Oklahomans, we're very fortunate with all the land we have. But, consequently, we kind of take it for granted in the middle part of the United States.

We found parks on the coasts is a place where people come together. They don't have front yards and back yards, so on weekends they go to their neighborhood parks. And they use their parks as kind of their front yard or their back yard. Consequently, parks departments engage people, and by engaging people it's engaging everyone in the neighborhood or people that travel or visit to the park.

There's art shows, there's just tons of things that happen in parks on the coasts that we didn't have or we don't do here in Tulsa. So this park has a very active programming staff. In fact, Semorex is our very first company to endow our programming. And we're working right now to get more endowment money for park programming.

But that's what's breathing life into the park. And it's not just bands and music, it's also things for kids, it's reading, it's creating these spaces for people to find different ways to use it. The game table that we're sitting at, that's really what people think about. And I always would tell people when we're talking about the park, about Guthrie Green, I would say to them when I would speak to a group, "How many people have been to Guthrie Green?" and they'd all raise their hands. "How many people remember what color the restaurant is?" No one would even remember, they could remember there was a restaurant and they'd eaten there but they wouldn't remember what color or what it

looked like. I'd ask them, "Why did you go there?" and people would immediately tell you a band they saw or an activity they took their kids too.

And that's where the emotional attachment to a place like a park is about. Tony and his team have just done a masterful job of creating those connections. That's what Tulsans are going to remember about the Gathering Place. Oh, yes, it'll be beautiful. Oh, yes, attentive to detail. Oh, they're mesmerized by it. But it's those little connections, the things they do with each other, and those memories that are really, I think, going to be what's lasting about the park.

JE: We've been open, you, we—I said we because as Tulsans, we begin to feel it is ours. I said we because that's the feeling I got. Isn't that a great feeling to you to know that, that we feel like it's ours?

JS: That's what I love about it. And if I had a dollar for every time somebody told me, "Hey, we're hosting Thanksgiving at our house because we're going to take all of our family or our friends to the Gathering Place to see it." If I had a dollar for every time someone said that I'd be super rich. And what was really rewarding was from the weekend before Thanksgiving through the Sunday after Thanksgiving the park was packed. In fact, we almost had as many people that week than we did the entire opening weekend.

You would walk around the park and you could just tell that there were large families, you know. Grandparents, cousins, parents, and kids. You'd listen to them giving tours to their out of town guests.

JE: Yeah.

JS: "Hey, look at our," or "Look at our playground," "Look at this tower," they were talking about it as it was theirs.

JE: Yes.

JS: Incredibly rewarding.

JE: Yeah.

Chapter 11 - 6:35

Park Opening

John Erling: There was a picture on the front page story of the *Tulsa World*, December 16, 2018. A gentleman who had been to the park every day of the first one hundred days, Juan Miret and his six-year-old daughter, Paloma. Isn't that neat?

Jeff Stava: Yeah.

JE: He came in and just kept coming and coming and coming. And he holds the record, I guess.

JS: [laughs] He does. I think he's the only person. And what was really neat about Juan is that he took pictures every day and posted them on social media. There's some photos in that article and they were online too. He had such unique perspective. First, it was big feature pictures. But as time went on, he took pictures of small details that most people probably have never seen. I follow him, he's a friend of ours, he worked for Growing Together, which was one of the Foundation's programs in Kendall Whittier with Tulsa Public Schools. He's now working for the Y.

Our park staff has kind of adopted him, he's here every day. He's still coming every day after the hundred days on Sunday. But, yeah, unique perspective. That article's pretty interesting, I enjoyed it.

JE: And here's a programming feature, this was yesterday's paper, Tuesday, December 18, 2018, where the centenarians came in, 100, 104, and then you had children, 10 and 11 years old. I'm sure there were those who were a little nervous—are these kids going to sit and listen to these elderly people?

JS: Uh-huh (affirmative).

JE: But I understand they were mesmerized and both sides were mesmerized.

JS: It was a pretty touching moment. Tony Moore and his team came up with this idea. It was incredibly meaningful—when you read the article you really get a glimmer, a feeling of what happened. But the connection between the stories and some song, the connection was unbelievable with the kids and the centenarians. A really neat moment.

Again, it's about programming. Tony and his team have just done an incredible job of bringing the park to life.

JE: Those kids will remember that the rest of their lives.

JS: They sure will.

JE: September 8, 2018, the park finally opens to the public. Talk about your feelings on that day. Could you sleep the night before? Here you were opening it, finally, it was here. What goes through your head? You're reflecting now a hundred days past.

JS: Well, you wanted the day to go perfect. [laughs] We wanted everything to be perfect and we wanted to be able to tell the world the story. So we were really focused on recruiting national and international press, which we did. We wanted it to be perfect for Tulsans. We had a huge parade, thousands came. We wanted it to be about the park so the opening ceremony was really short, fifteen to twenty minutes.

The mayor read the last book. And we challenged the kids of Tulsa to read two million books. We had class packs that we sent out to all the schools, pre-K through third grade. The Reading Tree came to life. We were really pushing reading, and we have really poor reading scores in third grade. I hope that improves in the future. That was our hope and goal. The mayor read the last book, it was about construction.

We had these huge doors at the main entrance. The kids pushed those doors open and ran into the park. That was a, that was a pretty neat moment [trying to keep from crying].

JE: And you're emotional now, you're making me emotional too. To see people lined up, I don't know if it was eight o'clock or what time the park was going to open that day, but weren't they lining up at six o'clock in the morning? Coming much earlier?

JS: Yeah, they were. Yeah, we had people that showed up at five. Of course, lining the parade route, yeah, there were just thousands of people here, I don't even know the total number. They're pictures, and it was just tons of people. We had it live on TV too, Channel 6, from eight to ten.

I mean, it's ten years of my life, you never think about it in the middle of it, but then you open it and it's just like it's done. I know we're still thinking about phase two and three, but everything that I did for ten years was around the design and the construction. To have it done and watching the people interact, kids climbing up the Skywalk Forest right now, you just see all the people engaged, it's just pretty emotional.

JE: Yeah. Well, that shows the passion you had for this and others too. But to be that passionate you weren't just a construction guy. Your heart was into it—

JS: Yeah.

JE: . . . big time. And that makes us all feel good to know that you were that way. So you've got other things to do and you're a young man, you said you were fifty years old.

JS: Yeah.

JE: You've got another fifty to live, you know.

JS: Sure.

JE: So we don't know what's going to happen to Jeff Stava, do we?

JS: No.

JE: It could go many ways. You could be consultant to other parks.

JS: [laughing]

JE: Which you probably are right now. People must—

JS: Oh, yeah, people from all over the United States are coming to visit. We had folks from Iowa and Nebraska here a couple weeks ago. Their Community Foundation came down with some board members. We have Dallas today.

This park is unique in how big it was and how much of it was built at once. And unique in the sense that we've created this \$100 million endowment that will pay for the programming. And the programming is not passive programming, it's active programming and that's unusual too. So there's a lot of people that are very fascinated with what we've done here. The fundraising is pretty unprecedented.

Suzanne Schrieber, Ken Levit, George Kaiser, myself are board members, a lot of our staff. We spent three or four years making sure that this park is endowed and that it

has the money that it needs to be impactful forever. That is a very big and daunting task. We raised just under \$220 million at the moment; we have more to raise. But what we've created here is something incredibly special and we want it to be everlasting.

JE: So we're assured then of the preservation of the park for fifty years from now. You talk money for an endowment to keep this thing going.

JS: That's right. The money to keep it going and cared for forever, that's what we want.

JE: Some attendance numbers, do you remember from the opening and how has fluctuated up and down?

JS: Through the end of November, over 625,000 people.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

JS: The opening weekend was around thirty-five or forty thousand, I think, I can't remember exactly. But it's been far more well attended than we really ever imagined. Our early forecast were a million to 1.2 million. I think the first year we'll probably spring closer to 1.7 million to 2 million, I mean, it could easily happen if the numbers continue.

We've only been open 104 days now so we have a lot of time left to get to September 7th. That will be our first year anniversary, the 8th.

Chapter 12 - 4:57

George Kaiser

John Erling: You know, some people might define George Kaiser by this park. He likes to talk about it, holds events right here, and then won't he say, "But that's not who we are"?

Jeff Stava: Yeah, George, the primary mission is equal opportunity for all children. That's what the mission of the Foundation is all about, that's what George's mission is about. And that's where he wants the focus. That's honestly probably one of the most important missions you could possibly have for this city and for this state.

I admire the hell out of him, I mean, his passion, his belief, and his perseverance at helping people out of poverty, I've just never met anyone like that. And the park does have a place in that mission, whether it's helping in the reading programs and education programs for kids, the Volcano Build, the little area in the playground where the youngest kids can have outdoor play experiences without getting trampled by older kids. Everything was very intentional for education. The Sensory Garden and the Water Play area, we have all these places that kids will be learning. I mean, the whole playground in and of itself, like the towers, you watch kids at the threshold jumping out into that rope deal and they can see straight down to the ground. You see them thinking about the fear and taking

the courage to step out into that rope area and seeing the ground. They walk out of that threshold and you can see success—that's a learning moment.

JE: Yeah.

JS: So this does have attachment to George's mission of equal opportunity for all kids. But the primary mission of the Foundation is an early childhood education.

JE: Early childhood education, he's been working on for years and years and years and will continue to do that. He's thinking about those children that need that early education.

JS: It's constantly in his mind and he reminds everyone, staff, at all of our meetings. And we've hatched the Birth through Eight Strategy best, Birth through Eight Strategy for Tulsa, BEST. It's a very ambitious Gathering Place size investment where we've integrated these programs and knitted them together, and our school system and everything, to help kids pull themselves out of poverty. That's a Gathering Place size investment in our core mission, which is a huge amount of focus of the Foundation right now. But that's the primary mission of our Foundation.

JE: One more about George Kaiser. He's a very private man, doesn't like public attention, doesn't want to put buildings up and put his name on them. But I've seen him in the park and he's very engaging; people come to him and talk to him and normally you wouldn't see a man of that stature mixing around with people, I guess. But he does here. And people enjoy talking to him. And he's got a personality that can just say, "Hey, I'm glad to hear that you like the park."

JS: [laughing] Yeah, he walked into the park through those opening doors like everyone else. He didn't stand there and shake everyone's hand. You know, we had a lot of donors, we kind of all wanted to welcome people in, so we were there. But George walked in like everyone else. He's really given the city a big gift by committing his entire fortune to helping northeast Oklahoma and Tulsa.

They always thanked him for the trails. In the grocery store, someone would say, "Oh, thank you for what you did at River Parks." I know he gets that from the Gathering Place, but you project fifty to a hundred years and you look back, his impact will be on bringing everyone up in our community.

JE: Yeah.

JS: And that will be his lasting legacy, I believe.

JE: Yeah. Your final words to the future, to fifty years from now, 2068, say something to them.

JS: I hope Tulsa is the kind of place that is an international city. I hope it's a city that has people from all over the world and all over the country here. I hope it's a prideful place like it is today. But I hope that it's bigger; I hope that it's more economically significant, cosmopolitan. I hope the architecture is still as progressive, like the Gathering Place architecture. I hope that we continue to seek the best for our kids and for the city's future. Those are the things

that I dream and hope for, and that's what the Foundation wants to continue to cultivate and move forward. And I really believe that the future Foundation leadership will continue to be plotting that path forward. And I hope that success is reached.

JE: Yeah.

JS: In those years.

JE: Well, thank you, Jeff. I appreciate it very much and if I can compliment you, your mother is right, you're going to be a salesman. You've been a salesman for this project. You understand concepts and how to put it together. So they were fortunate to you. You were placed in the right spot, right now. And you should feel good about that.

JS: Thank you.

JE: Yep.

Chapter 13 - 0:33

Conclusion

Announcer: This oral history presentation is made possible through the support of our generous foundation-funders. We encourage you to join them by making your donation, which will allow us to record future stories. Students, teachers, and librarians are using this website for research and the general public is listening every day to these great Oklahomans share their life experience.

Thank you for your support as we preserve Oklahoma's legacy one voice at a time, on VoicesofOklahoma.com.