

Des Moines skate park to break ground in 2016

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Before Cowles Commons' green umbrella was joined by a [fancy new light sculpture](#), the square known as Nollen Plaza was marked by a large, stepped wading pool and peppered with metal benches.

The plaza played host to business people lunching in the summer breeze, young protesters hoping to change the world and a community of skateboarders who coasted, carved and “ollied” every inch of the park from the moment school let out until night made obstacles indistinguishable.

For Kevin Jones, a skateboard enthusiast since elementary school, Nollen Plaza was a haven for skaters and kids who, like him, felt like square pegs in a round-hole world.

But over time, Des Moines cracked down on skaters, nearby suburbs opened new skate parks and the community that sprouted in Nollen Plaza withered like the annuals that once dotted its grounds.

In 2016, Jones and the Des Moines Regional Skatepark Committee want to usher skateboarders back downtown by breaking ground on one of America’s largest skate parks. Located on the

Principal Riverwalk, the size — 65,000 square feet — and scope — professional-grade obstacles — of this "destination skate park" stand to attract skaters from all over the country and, possibly, draw an important tournament or star-studded touring show.

The more-than-decade-long road to this moment hasn't been easy for Jones. Over the years, he's gone back to the drawing board countless times to hone his message and refine his fundraising strategy.

"Kevin should really be commended because he's stuck with this for years," said Carl Voss, former chairman of the Des Moines Bicycle Collective, "and, through it all, he's never lost hope."

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The skatepark committee, which is inching toward its first \$1 million raised, also hopes the park heralds a new era in the capital city, one that is a bit more welcoming for young people.

But to Jones, the park will provide kids with something much simpler and yet much more important: a place to call their own.

"Having a spot like Nollen Plaza where we all gathered was the most important thing to me as a kid," he said. "So many of the friends I made there stayed with me through the good and the bad. They're my lifelong friends and I don't know that I would've met them if it weren't for Nollen and for skating."

Next year promises to be important for Jones personally, too. At the beginning of December, he became the majority owner of Subsect Skateshop in the East Village, where he sells anywhere from 100 to 150 skateboards a month. And he's relishing his emerging role as leader and community advocate focused on ensuring the committee scrapes together the full \$3.5 million to complete the park.

"I always tell kids the most important thing you can do is talk to everyone you know about this park," Jones said. "Nollen was our (meeting spot), but when this gets built, this will be *your* skate park and, trust me, it will be so much more than a skate park."



Nosegrind: Learning to love the board

Living on the East Side, Jones and his neighborhood friends often traveled in a pack searching for something, anything to occupy their time. Then, one afternoon when he was 10, Jones found a "Back to the Future"-themed skateboard.

He spent a few weeks scooting around on his knees until an older kid showed him how to stand up on the board and, eventually, how to grind the curb.

"I didn't get the trick exactly right for a couple of weeks," Jones said. "But it was this inner personal battle where after someone showed me how, it was my fight to get the trick down, my fight to get it right."

"When you roll away from a trick that goes perfectly, it's like you've won the battle," he continued, "and there's no better feeling than that."

Skater Gabe Kauffman, 33, agreed: "No matter what I was doing (as a teen) I could jump on my board and forget about everything else. When I skateboarded, I could just escape."

Soon after Jones started at McCombs Middle School, the administration restricted kids skating on school property. The new rules marked the first time Jones realized skateboarding was seen differently than many other sports. He began to feel like adults around town believed the popular

myth that skateboarders were destructive hooligans; a bunch of Spicolis from "Fast Times at Ridgemont High" with skateboards instead of surfboards.

But he and his friends were working as hard as any kid trying to become better at baseball or basketball, Jones said, the only difference was they were landing tricks instead of throwing touchdowns.

In adulthood, Jones centered his life on the sport. He worked construction for a while, but he'd be too tired to practice at the end of the day, so he delivered pizzas instead and planned events at Skate South.

As his avocation slowly became his vocation, Jones saw countless people changed by skateboarding just as he had been.

Paul Turner's son was one of those kids. He didn't fit into team sports, said Turner, a longtime member of the skate park committee, but skateboarding was something where his son could feel like he belonged, like he was part of a community.

"It gave him a place in the world right when he needed one," Turner said.



McTwist: Getting the park on track

The idea for the Des Moines Regional Skatepark came out of a series of youth meetings held in 2004 by local group A Mid-Iowa Organizing Strategy, better known as AMOS. The No. 1 thing that kids at those meetings requested was a skate park, Turner said, so the committee set to work.

But the work took more time than they thought. Some of the middle school kids who were originally on the project recently graduated from college. And Jones takes partial responsibility for that — after all, he'd never tried to raise this kind of money before.

"I thought I could go in, show them a picture of the skate park and just say, 'You want to donate?'" Jones said. "It wasn't that easy and we struggled. Everyone was positive, but no one contributed."

So they regrouped, focused their mission and sought advice from community leaders who knew how to fundraise. Recently, the group secured a \$500,000 grant from the Community Foundation of Greater Des Moines.



Located near School Street and 2nd Avenue on the Riverwalk, the park will feature "transition skating" obstacles such as ramps and bowls and "street skating" designs inspired by the plazas and architecture found in the city, according to the [organization's website](#).

Ask Jones and the rest of the organizers why the city needs a skate park and they'll list reasons like they're rattling off their kids' names: It would build community, keep kids off both public and private property, get teens active and outside, bring economic development to the area.

The biggest resistance the committee encounters is the idea that a skate park could also attract unsavory characters and, maybe, crime, Jones said.

But Jones isn't worried about the park becoming an agent for negative influences: "These kids have waited for a skate park for so long that they'll be policing their own park," he said. "I

guarantee they will demand the area be respected, and if bad elements show up, they'll be shown the door."

Tailslide: Making the city a millennial haven

To Turner, building a skate park is one small step toward building a better, hipper, younger-leaning Des Moines.

"When you don't have an ocean and don't have mountains, you need to create alternative ways in which Des Moines could have things going on for young people: bike trails, walking trails, skate parks," he said.

"Really, if you are going to be a city of significance, you need to have a convention center, an arena, an arts district and a good skate park," he continued. "I think that's what makes a downtown in a modern America city."

Zachary Mannheimer, the former executive director of the Des Moines Social Club, has long advocated the city do more to support arts and create a culture that embraces the interests of young people. To him, a world-class skate park would go a long way toward those goals.

"A skate park would be a signal to young people that Des Moines is changing, Des Moines is progressive, and Des Moines will provide things you will enjoy, not just things your parents enjoy," Mannheimer said.

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And, once the park gets built, Mannheimer believes a symbiotic network between skaters, local food trucks and neighborhood coffee shops is bound to develop.

"It's just like what happens with bike lanes: the more lanes, the more people you see on the streets," Voss agreed. "The same would happen with a skate park. If they have a place to go, skaters will go there, and more kids will join them, and more kids will join."

"And they'll build connections and identities," he continued. "Eventually, it won't matter whether you're a Roosevelt kid or a Hoover kid or a Lincoln kid, you'll simply be a skate park kid."

And just like Nollen Plaza, Jones hopes, skaters and all the kids that feel like square pegs in a round hole will have a place to coast, carve, "ollie" and, most importantly, call their own.



Kevin Jones

Age: 38

Lives: Norwalk

Education: Lincoln High School.

Career: Jones worked odd jobs and skateboarded until becoming the majority owner of Subject Skateshop in December.

Family: Wife, Kristi, and three kids.

Twitter handle: [@Subsectarmy](https://twitter.com/Subsectarmy)

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