

Des Moines Lauridsen Skatepark: Tracing a 17-year journey, from a nuisance to a metro treasure

Skaters and community leaders persevered to create a world-class facility that opens this month.

Jan Hill and Paul Turner

Guest columnists

The Rev. Bill Cotton wasn't sure he was seeing what he was seeing. As a civil rights leader, the longtime pastor of Grace United Methodist in Des Moines, and founding member of the grassroots organization AMOS (A Mid-Iowa Organizing Strategy), he had seen a lot. But he never thought he would see a teenager on the roof of one of his two adjoining church garages attempt to jump the gap between them on a skateboard. Fortunately, the skater made the jump, Bill didn't have a heart attack, and he did what everyone does to annoying skateboarders — he shooed them away.

Little did Bill, who has since died, know that those skaters, from his own congregation, would join AMOS and start a revolution in Des Moines.

The skaters were part of the Grace United Methodist Church youth group, and when AMOS organized a large-scale community listening campaign, they met with that youth group and heard of the need for a first-class skatepark in Des Moines. That led AMOS to Callanan Middle School's newly formed skateboard club, where they heard more of the same. The AMOS adults challenged the youth to organize a presentation to Des Moines' mayor and City Council at an upcoming AMOS Issues Assembly.

At the AMOS Issues Assembly, Mayor Frank Cownie and members of the City Council, including Christine Henley, along with 300 AMOS leaders, watched the skaters' well-researched presentation on the positive role skateparks play in other cities. They reminded the audience that if your city doesn't have a skatepark, your city is a skatepark.

Thanks to AMOS leader Jan Hill, a mother of one of the skaters and one of the park's most tireless advocates, the skaters had a bold vision from the start.

First, go big or go home. They wanted the largest skatepark in the country to draw tourism and national skateboarding events. AMOS learned skateparks were not just recreational spaces but a tool for economic development, urban revitalization, and tourism.

Second, location, location, location. It had to be downtown or near downtown and preferably on the riverfront.

Third, it had to be designed correctly by the right people. Skaters know who makes the best skateparks, and AMOS insisted on a design-build framework to make that possible. The city bought the vision and pledged its support. That was on Oct. 31, 2004. It took 17 years, but it's finally happening. On May 22 of *this* year, the Lauridsen Skatepark will

officially open and host the one and only Olympic Trial Event for the skateboarding competition in the 2021 Olympics. Right here in downtown Des Moines, Iowa.

The passage was long because the journey to a skatepark requires overcoming enormous bias against skateboarders. Kevin Jones, owner of Subsect Skateshop and a critical early ally to this effort, knows too well the perils of being a skateboarder. As someone who grew up skating in Des Moines, Kevin knows you've chosen a sport that has little standing in the competitive sports world, is seen as a haven for drug-fueled juvenile delinquents, and is the bane of commercial property owners everywhere. Have you ever noticed the strange metal clips on the edges of smooth surfaces as you walk around a city? Those "skate stops" cost a lot of money to install on long smooth edges of benches, railings, sculptures, and stairwells.

Jones and AMOS recognized that rather than paying thousands of dollars for skate stops, you could give those youth a voice in their city and challenged them to organize a space of their own. What if skaters moved from being cynics to being citizens? If it was possible for them to elevate their sport and contribute positively to their city?

The AMOS team's dogged persistence was tested to its limits. Sites came and went. Two different fundraising efforts stalled out. Then one day, Brad Anderson, AARP Iowa director, and a group of his fellow former skaters walked into Subsect Skate Shop and offered to jump-start the effort.

They reached out to Christine Hensley, who was retiring from her long tenure on the Des Moines City Council, and Angela Connolly from the Polk County Board of Supervisors. Together they worked as tri-chairs and formed a skatepark advisory committee that raised \$7 million in private and public funds to make the park a reality.

The Lauridsen family made a huge commitment to the park's naming rights. The Community Foundation of Greater Des Moines made significant early investments. Many other corporate and community leaders stepped up thanks to the leadership of Hensley, Connolly, Anderson, and the entire committee.

As a result, on May 22, when those "juvenile delinquents" from the Mountain Dew-sponsored Olympic trial event drop their boards down into the largest open-air skatepark in the United States, it will mark the beginning of something big for Iowa. A free park. Open to the public. Downtown, on the riverfront. A space for kids. An investment in youth. Somewhere, Bill Cotton is smiling.

Jan Hill is an AMOS leader, the mother of a skateboarder and a member of the Skatepark Advisory Committee. Paul Turner is the former lead organizer of AMOS.