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After \$3M facelift, Newark's Military Park is the center of splendor



By [Barry Carter/Star-Ledger](#)

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Edgar Florentino hadn't been home in about a month.

The United Airlines flight attendant was criss-crossing the globe, traveling to Australia, Puerto Rico and Spain. When he returned home to Newark earlier this week, Florentino looked out of the window from his 27th floor apartment and was awed by the urban paradise staring back at him.

The fences surrounding the \$3 million renovation of Military Park on Broad Street were gone. People were milling about, some sitting underneath café style umbrellas at tables and chairs. A sweeping colorful landscape of flowers and trees enveloped the six acres below.

"This is beautiful," he said. "Now I have some place to come and chill."

The park, which opens officially today with a re-dedication ceremony, has been attracting people for a month now, bringing workers out of office buildings for lunch and other amenities.

Florentino scampered downstairs to get a better look at what he's been missing, walking past purple pansies and boxwoods, azaleas and hydrangeas, Algerian ivy dangling from planters with blue salvias and blue plumbago. Pink begonias, about 4,000 of them, fill in the shape of a giant sword leading up to the Wars of America statue by Mount Rushmore sculptor Gutzon Borglum.

Throughout the park and along the border, there's a canopy of Japanese, dogwood and elm trees to frame the pathways and create rooms of green enclosures, said Maureen Hackett, landscape designer. The landscape, she said, is open and it's visual clutter of the past is gone to the highlight the war cannons and statue of President John F. Kennedy.

When Florentino reached the ping-pong tables, he started talking to Richard Heyward, a Newark native who was with his wife, Rosemarie, and their two daughters, Kaliya, 7, and Emalina, 9.

The family of four was getting in a quick game on Rosemarie's lunch hour, but they were just as taken with park.

"Awesome," Richard Heyward said. "To see how they did this renovation and made it more friendly, this brings people together."

And that's what Dan Biederman, the developer who rehabilitated Bryant Park in New York City, had in mind when the project began last year.

The park would be a gathering place for games, horticulture and farmers' markets to bring people out and make the park come alive. In the short time that it's been open, the park has quickly become a friendly epicenter for the public from the time it opens at 7 a.m. until it closes at dusk.

"People are relaxed and not so uptight," said J. Roberts, an Essex County employee. "I think this came in handy and at the right time, because it changes the picture of Brick City."

On scheduled days, you see people taking Tai Chi or meditation classes, while others opt for line dancing or Zumba. At the front of the park, people sit and play board games

such as Scrabble and Connect Four, checkers and dominoes. Uno is a hit, but chess dominates with skilled players using the clock.

"The heavy hitters are starting to come down here," said Greg Barnes, who plays.

In the middle of the park, greenery continues its majestic embrace as people read newspapers and magazines from a rack adjacent to public restrooms. Along the perimeter, people are relaxed sitting in chairs as construction workers hammer way on Prudential's newest tower across the street.

Everyone who has been here is impressed, saying they remember the days when park was not as welcoming and not somewhere you wanted to hang.

"It's a far cry from what it used to be, but it's a beautiful thing now," said Bob Jones of Newark. "Now folks feel comfortable. They can exhale."

It's clean, there's security. The chairs and tables are not nailed down and no one has tried to take them, either.

"I thought they (park staff) brought them in at night and took them out in the morning," said Sal Martino, a state employee.

Security is keeping an eye on things, but you'd like to think, too, that others do also.

People like Jerry Dixon, the unofficial mayor of the park who comes everyday. He greets everybody, shaking hands, asking them where they are from, telling them to come on back to the place he has renamed – "Lovely Military Park."

And then there's Darryl Flagg.

He's on the maintenance crew, making sure the park remains the polished gem everyone covets.

Newark is his town, born and bred, and so is this park. He treats it that way every day he comes to work.

And he expects you to do the same thing, too.