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BUSINESS > PHILANTHROPY

Why build a \$10M fountain during a pandemic? Meet the philanthropist behind Dallas' big park gift

Nancy Best has been heavily involved in Klyde Warren Park since it opened in 2012.



Nancy Best (left) and Sheila Grant stand near the location where a new \$10 million interactive fountain will be built at Klyde Warren Park in Dallas. (BEN TORRES / Special Contributor)

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By [Cheryl Hall](#)

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When Klyde Warren Park opened in 2012, board member Nancy Best began a weekly routine of walking the grounds with the head of facilities to make sure that the downtown deck park was in top shape and functioning properly.

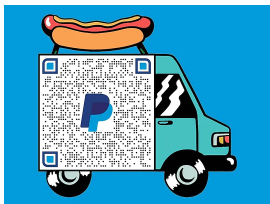
During one of her earliest tours with Michael Gaffney, she was dismayed to see holes in the cushioned safety surface in the children's play area.

"I had no idea how the damage was being made," said Gaffney, senior vice president of operations. "We stood there and watched, and she spotted it. It was high heels. Only in Dallas.

"Now we have a sign that says no high heels allowed in the park. Everybody takes a picture and laughs about it."

Neither knew until recently that one of the culprits was park co-founder Sheila Grant, whose shoes weren't high but were pointy enough to leave a permanent mark.

Best and Gaffney still meet nearly every week to survey the conditions. "We look at everything: the landscape, how clean the pavers are, how people are using the park, to make improvements," Gaffney said. "She has an amazing eye for detail. She helps me on a daily basis."



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Why build a \$10M fountain during a pandemic? Meet the philanthropist behind Dallas' big park gift



BY  **PayPal**

It's not the kind of duty that most major donors take on.

But then, Nancy Best is not your typical philanthropist.

Last week, the park announced that she and her educational entrepreneur husband Randy are footing the \$10 million bill to build an interactive "super fountain" at Klyde Warren Park that will shoot jets of water up to 10 stories high with syncopated lights and music.

It will be taller than any other immersive fountain in the world. And it will bear her name.

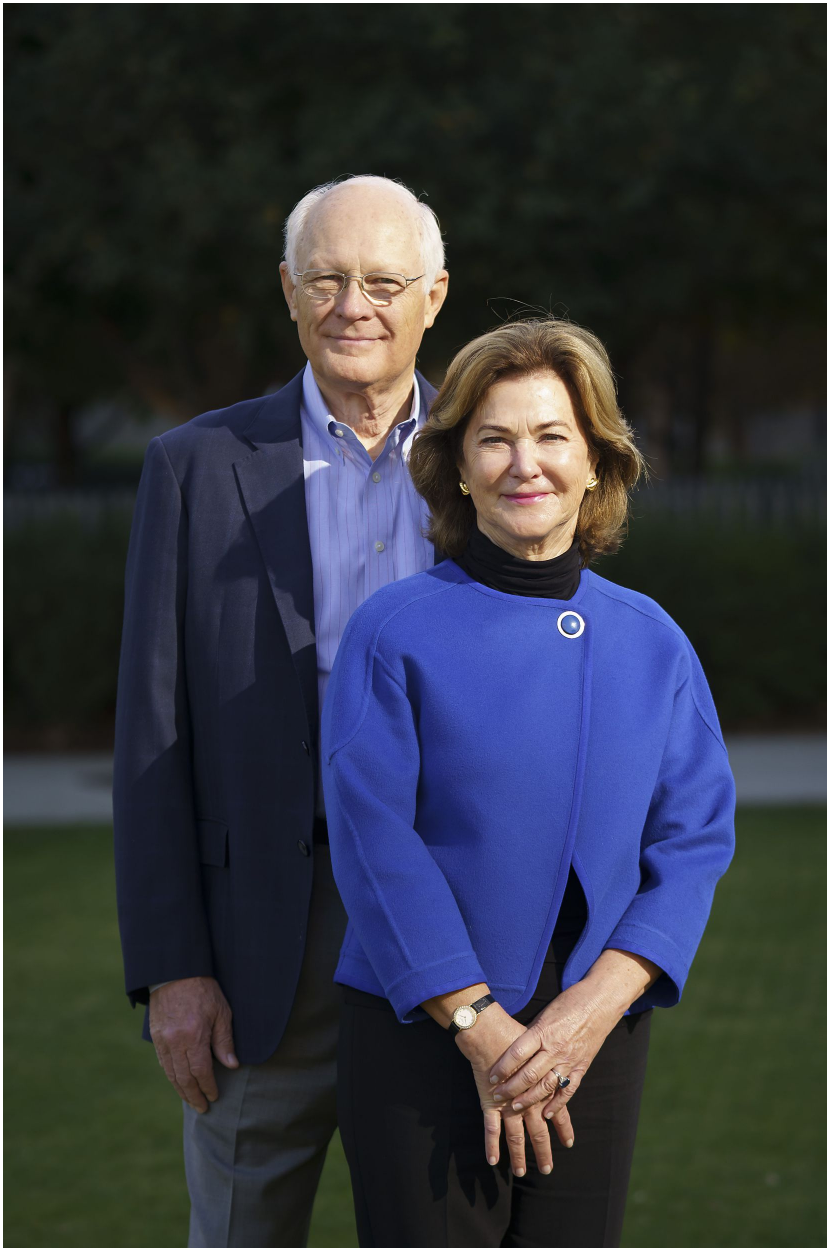
Installation of the Nancy Best Fountain will start next summer, with completion expected by the time the holidays roll in next year.

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Klyde Warren Park board member Nancy Best and her husband Randy were photographed at the park on Nov. 18. (Smiley N. Pool / Staff Photographer)

Quiet giving

Frankly, Best said, she debated whether to accept the naming honor. She is more than willing to tackle issues from the ground up but prefers to keep her giving in the background.

News of the fountain caused a social media stir from people who thought \$10 million would be better spent on humanitarian efforts in light of long food lines.

“There has to be a balance between treating the current needs and investing in the future,” said Jody Grant, Sheila’s husband and chairman of the Woodall Rodgers Park Foundation. “We’d always contemplated a fountain. There’s never a perfect time to do these things. But for a city to prosper, it needs continuous investment, not just continuous consumption. The investment we make today will determine the financial health of Dallas in its future. We think this is really important.”

Some incorrectly griped that this was city taxpayer money being squandered.

It’s not. It’s all money from the Bests.

Grant took affront to the assertion that the board members of the Woodall Rodgers Park Foundation were uncaring. “Our board members are deeply involved in community affairs and are doing more than their fair share — Nancy in particular.”

At 77, Best serves as the chair of the Austin Street Shelter and Genesis Women’s Shelter and was instrumental in raising \$15 million for each of those nonprofits to build new facilities. Construction is slated to begin on the buildings in January.

She is a longtime member of the boards of the Winston School for dyslexic children; New Friends New Life, which helps former prostitutes turn around their lives; and the Perot Museum of Nature and Science, where she serves as head of the development committee.

“I’m super involved in Austin Street because what we do is house people,” Best said. “We have case management. We have programs that help get people off the streets and into a home. We are super successful at that.”

The new center will allow people to stay inside during the daytime. There’s not enough room for that in the current facility.

“When they’re inside, we have case management, health care, breakfast, lunch and dinner, and they’re not out in the

elements,” she said. “We can get them a job, out of the shelter and into a home.”

She knows that the need will continue to grow exponentially as more people face terrible financial struggles from COVID-19 and the resulting unemployment.

“Nancy goes to the [Austin Street] shelter week after week and goes through the operating budget,” said Jeanne Whitman Bobbitt, who is a volunteer for the homeless shelter’s capital campaign.

Because of Best’s determination, Genesis will have a new outreach office with a law library and legal help for women who want to get a divorce or to keep a batterer at bay. There will be children’s play therapy and counseling rooms.

“I’ve seen many people with terrific resources provide wonderful funding,” said Whitman Bobbitt, former headmistress of The Hockaday School. “But I’ve not seen many who climb in and make the project work at the level of detail and with the assiduous attention to where it could go off the rails.

“She has made a number of quiet, unsung gifts to a number of causes to help them meet their COVID distress. She’s checked every box.”



A watercolor by Michael McCann shows The Nancy Best Fountain at night.
(Courtesy Klyde Warren Park)

Longtime dream

The Grants say they have dreamed of building a fountain to welcome visitors to the park at the Pearl Street entry.

“Sheila and I have talked about this for years, thinking about what would be an iconic feature to have in the park on the east end that would bring people together,” Best said.

For Sheila Grant, the fountain has been her holy grail.

“Nancy has heard me talk about this endlessly,” she said. “I decided I wanted a fountain after being in New York and also seeing fountains all around the world and how they attracted people constantly.

“When I first broached the idea to Nancy, she immediately caught on that it would be a game-changer for the park and for Dallas.

“When Nancy called and said she and Randy wanted to underwrite the fountain’s construction, we were thrilled but not entirely surprised because Nancy puts the park and this city first. That she would offer such an incredible gift to our citizens in a year filled with so many challenges — well, that’s just Nancy.

“I’m walking on air because of this gift.”

The Bests and the Grants became close friends in the early 1990s, when both couples lived at the Claridge condo high-rise along Turtle Creek.

When the Grants first pitched this cockeyed idea of building a park over Woodall Rodgers Freeway, the Bests were among the first to give a seven-figure donation to get the project off the ground.

Best said there’s a reason why she became so personally attached to the park.

That first year, she brought her 8-year-old grandson along while she made her rounds.

“He was just standing there with his lip hanging down because kids were all playing and having fun, and he was just standing there with me,” she recalled. “A group of little boys who were playing soccer came over and said, ‘Come on. Come on. Play with us.’

“Michael looked at me and smiled. And I said, ‘Go!’ And off he went with those little boys. Nobody knew each other. It was just a group of kids who came to downtown Dallas to play in the park. I just loved that, and I loved what it meant for Michael to be included. It’s an inclusive place where everybody is part of what’s going on.

“Nobody’s left out.”

The Grants thought Nancy would be a great choice when they were assembling the park’s board in 2008. But they say

they underestimated just how great she would be.

“She’s the best board member imaginable,” Sheila said. “She gives endless hours to the park and boundless donations. Many of the gifts were given so quietly that Jody and I didn’t initially know about them because she asked our executive director not to tell us. She didn’t want anyone to make a fuss over her generosity.”

Jody agrees: “Nancy is the perfect combination of board member and philanthropist. She has given in every way — heart, her time, her energy and her money. She even served as interim president between executive directors. And this gift is just extraordinary. It is the perfect way to recognize her love for the park.”

A few years ago, Klyde Warren was fighting a failing battle with spit-out chewing gum splotching the white pavers that serve as sidewalks.

“Nancy and I both hated it, but she was the one who went out and found the gum machine that gets rid of it. Who’s ever heard about a gum machine?” Sheila said. “Nancy was determined that our white pavers were not going to have those spots on them.”

Sheila won’t name names, but talked about how she and Jody recently visited two well-known parks in another city.

“My gosh, they both looked awful, just awful,” Sheila said. “As I walked through them, I thought, ‘My word, they need Nancy.’ They were not in pristine, beautiful shape like our park is.

“Every park needs a Nancy Best, and thank heavens we have her.”

Building a fountain is not an act of frivolity, Best contends.

“Think about the mental health benefits of being outside. Think about what that does to people’s blood pressure,” she said. “A park is a place where families can come together, be outside and be happy. This fountain will bring hope, joy and happiness.”



PHILANTHROPY

Klyde Warren Park to get the world's tallest interactive fountain

Klyde Warren Park in Dallas is getting a next-generation, interactive, "super fountain" that will shoot jets of water up to 95 feet into the air — higher than any other immersive fountain in the world.

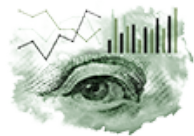
BY CHERYL HALL



Cheryl Hall, Business columnist. Cheryl, a journalism graduate of SMU, has covered business for more than 45 years and gets her phone calls returned. She's won numerous awards including several Katies from the Press Club of Dallas and a lifetime distinguished achievement award from the Society of American Business Editors and writers.

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