

The East Side's 'unofficial mayor'

When Mary Watson died in 2014, there was no lengthy obituary detailing her good works and many small acts of kindness, but five years later, a group of city and neighborhood leaders joined her family on Charleston's East Side to honor her life and legacy. The occasion was the formal dedication of a small city park at Amherst and America streets, diagonally across from the small business she ran for four decades and that's still run by her son, Joseph.

He was among many speakers who talked about "Miss Mary's" strong faith, work ethic and generosity to those who came into her small store. "I called her 'the unofficial mayor of the East Side' because nothing went on on the East Side that Miss Mary didn't know about," said Latonya Gamble, president of the Eastside Community Development Corp.

Born Mary Prioleau in southern Charleston County, she married Benjamin Watson in 1947, and the young family moved to 62 America St. in 1957 and raised their three children there. They first



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Mary Watson, 1930-2014, inside her sweet shop at Amherst and America streets on Charleston's East Side.

opened Watson's Grill and Restaurant, which eventually became Mary's Sweet Shop. "My grandmother started without hardly anything in her pockets, but she supported all of us," her grandson Joseph L. Watson said. "She was strong and worked hard."

A new city sign reads simply "Mary Watson Park," but it represents more than just a tribute to one of the neighborhood's most respected residents and businesswomen. It also signals a bright spot and new hope for the East Side, which has seen more than

its share of recent struggles, including two fatal shootings this summer.

The city not only spruced up this pocket park by adding new plantings, but it also plans to start renovations soon on the St. Julian Devine Community Center several blocks farther north, and the city's Parks Department also is talking to the Charleston County School District about activating the dormant quadrant of Hampstead Square next to the former Wilmot Fraser Elementary School.

All those changes promise to make the East Side a more attractive, livable neighborhood. The Eastside Garden Club and Eastside Community Development Corp. were acknowledged for helping the city bring about the tribute to Mary Watson.

"We have come together in unity to get this done," City Councilman Robert Mitchell said during the dedication, "so other people can see what's happening on the East Side." That sort of cooperation will be vital as the neighborhood continues to work with the city on new parks and other positive changes there.