



Overland Park Strikes Gold: FIFTY Years and Counting



When people hear that Overland Park turns 50 this year, the first thing they register is surprise: *only 50 years?* This is the second largest city in Kansas, winner of numerous national awards, home to top-rated schools and the headquarters for several large corporations—and it's only been 50 years?

Little over a year ago, Overland Park Mayor Carl Gerlach established a committee to celebrate and commemorate 50 years of Overland Park history and progress—and do it on a budget. Mary Birch, an attorney with Lathrop & Gage and former chamber of commerce chair for 18 years, led the challenge. The group decided to focus the celebration on three themes: city leadership, quality of education and the future. They also decided to spread across each of the city's many annual events. What's more, they would commission a permanent work of art to commemorate the milestone. While celebrating the past and present, Overland Park would spend its 50th year looking ahead as well.

Celebrating the Present

At February's State of the City address, the mayor unveiled the celebration logo. May 20 marked the actual incorporation date, with a luncheon at the New Theatre Restaurant for business and civic leaders.

But for residents, the real fun was at the city's annual events. From June's Jazz in the Woods to September's Fall Festival, Overland Park's birthday was heralded every few weeks. At the July 4th Star-Spangled Spectacular, the fireworks finale featured a launch of 50 gold shells.

Birch's committee even held a special event to honor the city's women leaders. In August, the Women of Influence Tea honored 27 women who, Birch says, "have contributed greatly from a leadership perspective to Overland Park over the last 50 years," including Deanna Rose, the city's only police officer killed in the line of duty, former city councilwoman and congresswoman Jan Meyers, and former state senator Audrey Langworthy. The 50th anniversary celebrations will culminate in the Mayor's Christmas Tree Lighting ceremony on November 12.

A Permanent Commemorative

One of the most exciting parts of this golden celebration is the creation of a permanent piece of artwork, commemorating the city's achievements over 50 years. The committee commissioned three works, to be combined in a three-panel piece to be unveiled in October. Artist Susan Wilson created

the panel entitled Faces of Leadership.

"I haven't lived here that long and I wanted to do some artwork—I was thinking of historical sites or a portrait of somebody of importance—after I saw the announcement [of the anniversary]," Wilson recalls. But her original idea mushroomed into an oil-on-canvas painting depicting 135 faces of Overland Park leaders, past and present. Having lived in more than a dozen different locations around the country, she was surprised at how much a Kansas town had to offer when her family relocated here three years ago. "The art community alone floored me," she says, adding, "and then we really loved the feel of the community."

Overland Park artist Marilyn Lyons created the second piece of the collaboration, a photographic collage illustrating the partnership of commerce and government. Her photos include depictions of the Overland Park Convention Center, the Marriott and the Sheraton, among others. Lyons, a 17-year resident, says she loves the city's variety. "It's that diversity that makes our city work really well," she says.

The third piece of the commemorative features Mary Mayfield's collage of digital images representing the city's quality of life. A resident since the city's infancy, Mayfield has seen many changes, recalling that Kmart and TG&Y stores used to be the cornerstones of downtown. "We thought it was a wonderful place to raise kids," says Mayfield, who applauds the renewal of Overland Park's downtown. "I traveled selling advertising for a while, and it gives you a great appreciation for coming home."

The City Leadership

To Birch, celebrating the city's leaders was a no-brainer. "This is a quality community that has been done very right, that has won tons of national awards, and none of it would have happened without leadership," she asserts.

In its short history, Overland Park has had only seven mayors, including present-day mayor Carl Gerlach, elected in 2005. "What I love most are our residents and business owners and operators," says Gerlach. "Each has a good Midwestern work ethic and high values, and takes extreme pride in Overland Park." Gerlach's State of the City address this year championed the new Overland Park Soccer Complex, which hosted the summer's Kansas State Cup and U.S. National Youth Soccer Championships. Despite a sluggish economy, more than 2,000 new jobs were added this year through companies like Apria Healthcare and Black & Veatch.

The Role of Education

A nationally ranked school system was an early goal of the city's founders. Beginning with Shawnee Mission North High School, four school districts now serve Overland Park: Shawnee Mission, Blue Valley, Olathe and Spring Hill. All four are high achievers, boasting high ACT scores, near 100 percent graduation rates and large numbers of scholarship recipients and National Merit finalists. For those seeking higher education, Overland Park has developed Johnson County Community College and the KU Edwards Campus.

Preparing for the Future

Celebrating a golden milestone also involves looking ahead—something the city has always done. "Years ago we were building roads and educating kids," Birch recalls. "Now we've got museums coming and soccer fields, and people are demanding that." Citizens no longer think of Overland Park as a gateway to Kansas City, but as a thriving community in its own right.

Bill Ebel, the city's director of planning and development services, agrees that Overland Park's strongest asset is its quality of life. Ebel says Overland Park must recognize changing housing needs, particularly for retired people and young professionals. That demographic, he says, will want a range of lifestyle choices beyond the house in the suburbs. The city's newest development plans include what Ebel calls "villages," a more urban kind of community that places townhomes and lofts alongside offices, storefronts and parkland. One example Ebel notes is Buckley Court, a townhome development by Regions, LLC, located less than half a mile from downtown Overland Park.

The Prairie Fire project at 135th Street and Nall is a more ambitious micro-village that embraces the same idea. Already approved by the city, the 60-acre development will include lofts, townhomes, its own park, upscale retail, a hotel and even a branch of the American Natural History Museum.

Such developments keep the city vital. "Where Overland Park is going in the future, through our Vision Metcalf plan and some of the things that we're doing relative to the Vision Metcalf plan, is to try to provide that housing choice and that lifestyle," says Ebel, referencing the city's ambitious plan to redevelop the Metcalf Road corridor by creating mixed-use developments from downtown all the way to 119th Street.

With a projected growth of about 40,000 people over the next 30 years, Overland Park may eventually expand its boundaries—again. But despite accusations of sprawl, Birch thinks Overland Park should be proud of its growth. "There are some communities who believe that our success is their decline, and it really isn't that way," she says, noting that Overland Park's success has buoyed the entire county. "I don't understand how you can win national award after national award for being one of the best places to live and to work in the country and have to apologize for it."

Gerlach has no intention of apologizing for his city. He credits its success to the residents and businesspeople, which he says "is evident in the care and support of our city's outstanding quality of life." In the future, he adds, the city will build on its reputation as "a community that brings together families, is home to outstanding educational opportunities, has a diverse economy that attracts many professionals, young and old, and provides for recreation and enjoyment." Overland Park's first 50 years are just the beginning. JCL

Claire M. Caterer grew up in Overland Park and attended Pawnee Elementary, Hillcrest Junior High, and Shawnee Mission West High School.



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