

Arson victims commemorated at new Vancouver park

BY GRAEME WOOD, VANCOUVER SUN MAY 24, 2009



A choir sings at a memorial for the Etibako family and Ashely Singh, all of whom were killed in a fire at the Etibako home 3 years ago at Skeena Terrace in Vancouver. Yanick Etibako, one of four surviving siblings in her family stands at left. A memorial mosaic table was unveiled at the Skeena Terrace park during the ceremony Saturday afternoon, May 23, 2009.

Photograph by: Jenelle Schneider, Vancouver Sun

Three years after an east Vancouver community was shocked at the arson deaths of five people, a celebration of life took place under sunny skies Saturday afternoon at a new park in Skeena Terrace, a low-rent housing project, where the fatal blaze occurred.

Family, neighbours, friends, and community members gathered at Skeena Terrace Park to watch the unveiling of a large concrete mosaic picnic table and the planting of a magnolia tree to symbolize life and commemorate the victims.

On May 15, 2006 Ashley Singh, 17, Adela Etibako, 39, and three of her six children, Edita, 12, Benedicta, 9, and Stephane, 8, were murdered when the Etibako's apartment was set on fire.

All of their initials are engraved on the colourful 15-foot table.

The mosaic was created by children in the neighborhood and is the focal point of the park, which used to be a rundown basketball court. A new playground was also recently erected.

Community leaders and family members say the park serves as a means to move forward from the tragedy and bring some closure.

"Now that we're here together let's try to create something. Because there's always life after death," said Singh's cousin Elvin Prakash speaking to the crowd.

An emotional Yanick Etibako, 25, Adela's only surviving daughter, gave a speech at the park but was overcome with tears halfway through.

"I want to thank the people that helped: The community, the fire department, and the police officers involved in the case," she said.

Yanick has a two year-old daughter and is pregnant with a second child. She said the park and table are an important legacy for her perished mother and siblings.

The Etibakos fled the war-torn Democratic Republic of Congo in 1997 and their deaths jostled the Congolese-Canadian community in Vancouver.

"I think it's time to start to think forward. This is one way that we can start healing from the tragedy," said Mambo Masinda, the president of the Congolese Community of B.C.

High school student Lorraine Masudi, 18, gathered around the table with a group of friends. She said the tragedy brought everyone in the Congolese community together.

"All of us got closer after this happened," she said, adding that it's still difficult for her and her friends to understand why such a thing could happen.

Her friends said the park is now a nice place for Skeena Terrace residents and visitors to go, whereas before it felt unwelcoming, like someone's backyard.

Benefiting children and youth is exactly what Sharon Mohamed, a resident of Skeena Terrace for 20 years and the Skeena Terrace tenancy association's president, had hoped to do when she and others thought of commemorating the Etibakos and Singh.

"The kids are so much a part of this community, tomorrow promises nothing," she said.

The park was created in collaboration between the tenancy association and BC Housing, the provincial agency that manages housing projects.

"I think it's a good day. It brings a lot of closure," said Tony Wist who works for BC Housing and lives in Skeena Terrace.

Missing at the community gathering was Bolingo Etibako, 20, Adela's son, who is in jail for robbery.

Bolingo escaped the blaze and was dating Singh at the time.

In October, 2008, Nathan Richard Fry was convicted of five counts of first-degree murder for setting the Etibako apartment on fire. It was alleged by prosecutors he did it in retaliation against Bolingo who allegedly outed Fry to police regarding a stabbing in Metrotown.

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VANCOUVER, BC: MAY 23, 2009 -Friends and family gather to remember the Etibako family and Ashely Singh, all of whom were killed in a fire at the Etibako home 3 years ago at Skeena Terrace in Vancouver. Yanick Etibako, one of four surviving siblings in her family stands at left. A memorial mosaic table was unveiled at the Skeena Terrace park during the ceremony Saturday afternoon, May 23, 2009.

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