

Entry 20

Subject: Kiwanis Park, Napa

Nestled in the middle of downtown Napa on the corner of Elm and Coombs Streets, just two blocks west of the Napa River, lives Kiwanis Park. One could almost drive by without noticing it, as it sleeps quietly most days. During the Spring and Summer, however, Kiwanis Park comes alive and lights up the neighborhood, providing a gathering place for many to come watch fast pitch girls softball.

The Kiwanis Club's mission statement is to empower communities to improve the world by making lasting differences in the lives of children. What a job they have done with Kiwanis Park! For seventy-six years, Kiwanis Park has been the home to Napa Valley Girls' Fastpitch Association. From late May through July, you can drive by Kiwanis Park on any given weeknight and hear the sounds of balls and strikes, hits and cheering and smell barbecued hot dogs and freshly cut grass. Young girls from age thirteen through nineteen are coached and encouraged, helping develop self-esteem and integrity, all while having fun with friends.

I remember going to Kiwanis Park with my parents several times a year as I was growing up. We would bring our lawn chairs and blankets, and sit under the lights, watching cousins and family friends play softball. I would run around on the grass with my friends, playing and watching softball. I remember hearing my cousin's name announced over the loudspeaker as she came up to bat and thought I was at a professional game! It was here that I first found my love of the game of softball. I started playing softball as soon as I was old enough at the age of five. The years flew by and soon I was old enough to try out for Napa Valley Girls' Fast pitch, or Kiwanis league, as it's fondly called.

Stepping on to that field for my first of many games and hearing my name announced is one of my best memories. It was at Kiwanis Park that I had my first home run, along with my first sprained ankle. I formed lasting friendships with girls that I hadn't met before and found myself surrounded and supported by a community that showed up simply to watch softball. When it came time for high school, I held my breath waiting for the "Big Game". For years, I had watched the showdown between Vintage and Napa High take place at Kiwanis Park and I longed for the opportunity to take part in that tradition. This year is very bittersweet as I get ready for my last Big Game at Kiwanis Park; one last time stepping onto that dirt, and one last time hearing my mom screaming excitedly from the stands--whether it was because someone made a good play, or because the umpire made a call she didn't agree with.

In December, Kiwanis Park became the latest addition to the Downtown Temporary Murals Program, which is an initiative to revitalize the downtown area. The murals are all created by local talent in Napa. Residents fundraised nearly fifty percent of the funding for the mural at Kiwanis Park, a direct reflection of the community orientated nature of the project. The Kiwanis mural celebrates Napa's spirit through depictions of young women in softball, swinging, sliding and fielding beneath the summer hills. I hope Kiwanis Park is around for many more years so other young women can make lasting memories and

experience the same sense of community that I have been blessed with.