

Park leader, peace maker and occasional art critic

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Nathan Burrell has big shoes to fill. But he's not worried about his footwear.

In April, Burrell took over leadership of Richmond's James River Park from Ralph White, the wildly popular manager who retired in January after 33 years.

Burrell, 32, said he loves White, who was his mentor. So is Burrell the new Ralph White?

"People ask me that a lot," said Burrell, laughing and sitting in the sand by the rushing water at Pipeline Rapids. "A co-worker says that I'm Ralph Brown."

Burrell's a young black man, and White's an old white guy, so it was a good joke. But Burrell went on to make clear that he's in charge now.

"The comment that I get most frequently is, 'You have big shoes to fill.' And my comment always is, 'Very true, but I'm not looking to fill anybody's shoes. I've cobbled my own shoes, and I'm filling those.'"

Sporting wrap-around sunglasses and a green city-parks T-shirt with his beard and dreads, Burrell looked handsome and happy — a man working his dream job.

In many ways, Burrell will carry on White's work — promoting the park, helping expand it, coordinating volunteers and doing unglamorous jobs, such as picking up litter and painting over graffiti.

White was famous, however, for occasionally bucking City Hall, running the park as he saw fit. Burrell, on the other hand, said working with the city bureaucracy — not fighting it — is best for the park in the long run.

"The way (White) managed was very much like we were a separate entity," Burrell said. "But that doesn't get us the equipment and manpower and things like that that's needed."

In a telephone interview, White said Burrell has the right physical and mental makeup for the job.

"He can lead a nature walk. He can do a history talk. He can arrange maintenance schedules. He can cut trails and teach chain saw safety. He can do budget projections. He can speak before councilmen and doesn't freeze up," White said. "He's got it all."

And, White acknowledged: "I think Nate has an ability to deal with the bureaucracy that I don't have. ...

He puts up with stuff.”

As park superintendent, Burrell makes \$60,000 a year. He oversees a full-time staff of three, and he said two more will be coming on in a few weeks. The park adds a handful of seasonal workers during warm months.

Burrell was born in Lancaster County and raised in Essex County. He graduated from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2002 with a degree in parks and recreation management and a minor in environmental studies.

Burrell met White when White spoke to one of his VCU classes. Burrell recalls thinking, “I want to know what he knows. I want to work with him.”

He got an internship with the park, then a seasonal job, and went full time in December 2004. Among other things, he cut biking and hiking trails, helping turn Richmond into a popular playground for mountain bikers.

Burrell and his wife, Tuckahoe Montessori School teacher Tracey Brockwell, have a daughter, Zora, 11, and a son, Khalil, 5. They live in South Richmond, where Burrell likes to garden and keeps chickens and bees.

“I enjoy my personal life as much as my professional life,” Burrell said.

James River Park, part of Richmond’s parks and recreation department, encompasses about 600 acres of mostly wild riverside lands and islands. It draws an estimated 600,000 to 1.5 million visitors a year.

Because the park consists of 20 sections, from the popular Pony Pasture Rapids in South Richmond to the lesser-known Great Shiplock Park near Shockoe Bottom, some people don’t even know when they are in James River Park.

Burrell wants to remedy that with signs that better label and connect the sites.

“If you are in Tredegar Iron Works, and you are a visitor to the city of Richmond, how do you know to go to (the park’s) Belle Isle, where there’s more Civil War history on the island? You don’t, unless you are in the know,” he said. “Those are the types of things I’m really looking to push forward.”

A few feet away from Burrell’s spot in the sand, Dani Mowbray, 23, lounged by the river while her playful pit bull, Tank, dragged a log nearly the size of his head.

“We love it here,” Mowbray said. “It’s serene. It’s blissful.” And she didn’t know that that Pipeline area, an easy walk from the bustle of Shockoe Slip, was part of James River Park.

A few decades ago, the James was a polluted mess that drew a lot of sketchy people. Today, the river is

safe to snorkel in on most days, thanks to tough clean water laws. Now, visitors include parents with toddlers, college kids, kayakers and birders.

Burrell said, “You still come across those people that are like, ‘You actually swim in the river?’ ‘Oh yeah, absolutely. All the time.’ ‘With your kids?’ ‘Yeah, absolutely.’ “

There was a time when James River Park seemed like white-people’s land, and even today minorities appear to be under-represented in a city that’s about half-black. Burrell hopes to expand access to the park from the city by creating more bike routes, among other things. And he is heartened to see Pony Pasture Rapids become a popular spot for Latinos.

“That has been one of the great changes that has taken place” there, Burrell said. “They come with their families, multigenerational.”

Burrell expects the next few years to bring improvement, including completion of a scenic walkway over the James from Brown’s Island downtown to South Richmond. He also envisions a drive to raise money to renovate the granite, Gothic Revival pump house below Byrd Park. “It’s one of the most beautiful structures in the city.”

Chris Hull, president of the James River Outdoor Coalition, a volunteer group, said one of Burrell’s biggest attributes is his desire, like White, to keep the urban park wild.

“We are not putting in new lunch shelters, parking lots, tennis courts or volleyball courts,” Hull said. “We are keeping the park as a natural environment.”

Among his accomplishments, Burrell pushed for new trails and other improvements around the once-shabby Great Shiplock Park, Hull said.

Where he once saw trash and needles, Hull said, he now finds families. “It’s kind of reclaiming part of the city to make Richmond a really nice place to live.”

That reclamation — attracting good people to drive out the bad — is a major reason the park prospered under White. It’s a trend Burrell plans to continue.

To that end, Burrell hopped up from the sand, grabbed a paint roller and some brown paint and moved on to that morning’s chore: making graffiti disappear.

He decided to leave a huge chalk mural, on a trestle support, that looked like a psychedelic heron blowing bubbles. That’s another perk of Burrell’s job.

“I get to be an art critic,” he said, clearly enjoying himself.

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