

Jai's Parks Tour

420
PARKS



Year One: Visiting 420 Parks



With nearly 24,000 acres of parkland in the Fairfax County Park Authority (FCPA) system it's not surprising to find 420 parks located throughout Fairfax County, with parks in each magisterial district, each with distinct amenities. Some serve as neighborhood gathering spots, others are district parks or special destinations such as our lakefront parks. What is surprising is that Park Authority Executive Director Jai Cole has visited every single park in the system. All within the first year of her tenure.

She recently celebrated the completion of her park tour, a journey which allowed her to get a sense of each park, to meet staff and visitors alike, and to identify service gaps and opportunities for improvement. Cole, and about 100 volunteers and local officials took a few moments to celebrate the completion of her tour as well as to plant trees and pull invasive plants at Lake Fairfax on National Public Lands Day. It was a great time to be volunteering in any park.

"I grew up in Reston with Lake Fairfax as my backyard. That's where I fell in love with nature and had the adventures that led me to become an ecologist. Fairfax County had such a significant influence on who I am that I was thrilled when I was chosen last year as the new Executive Director of FCPA. Not many people in my profession can lead, preserve, and enhance their childhood park system and I feel very honored to have been given this opportunity," explained Director Cole.

Why go that extra mile? Cole noted, "I needed to see our parks to be their champion, but I also needed to see the surrounding neighborhoods. Parks in Franconia shouldn't look exactly like parks in Vienna. Parks should reflect the community they serve, and different neighborhoods may value different ways to recreate. To get to know this park system and really start to understand the needs of our residents, I needed to see them – all of them."



So, what did she find on her tour? "I've seen what I thought was impossible: a phenomenal park system with some of the best amenities any system in the country has to offer, but also with parks that are bursting with potential waiting to be imagined. The trip was fantastic," Cole exclaimed. "I saw the many parks that we own and manage. I met people who work at the parks and who visit the parks. I saw its strengths and its weaknesses, I noted places that needed attention and care and investment, and I was wowed by both our facilities and our wonderful staff."

Cole notes that the past year has been a learning experience but it's just the start of a much bigger effort to ensure that every resident can experience all the FCPA has to offer, regardless of where they live, or their ability to pay. She expands on that sentiment, "My definition of racial equity in parks is "Where race and income does not predict the quantity and quality of parks in a specific area and Rec Centers and programs are affordable for all residents." Parks and recreation centers are such a vital part of the lives of so many of our residents and I hope you can take some time for yourself and your family to get to one of our 420 parks soon."

Executive Director Jai Cole

Jai Cole is the Executive Director of the Fairfax County Park Authority. Cole grew up in Fairfax County, residing in Reston for 25 years. She attended South Lakes High School where she played youth softball, basketball and field hockey. She then went on to earn a Bachelor of Arts in biology at the University of North Carolina Greensboro where she played Division I basketball.