

FEATURE

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Homelessness is prevalent to most IU students and Kirkwood Avenue business owners when they see People’s Park. Across the street from Kilroy’s on Kirkwood, the park became the subject of an IU student’s petition to Bloomington Mayor John Hamilton, asking to restore the park “to its original value.” The petition was met with uproar and began a discussion on how to define People’s Park and

public space.



By Katelyn Haas, Dominick Jean, Melanie Metzman and Emily Miles | investigations@idsnews.com

Jo DiBenedetto heard another cat-call, aimed at one of his female friends, coming from People’s Park. Then a barrage of blue and red lights illuminated DiBenedetto’s walk home from class. Later that night screaming from the park filtered into DiBenedetto’s room in his Kirkwood Avenue home.

This compelled him to attempt to effect the change he and his friends had discussed for years — finding a better place to live for the park’s homeless population.

In his sleeplessness, DiBenedetto, an IU senior, composed a *change.org* petition and posted it to the IU Class of 2017 Facebook page.

By afternoon, he said the petition was the talk of campus. He had received more than two dozen messages via text, email and Facebook.

Some shamed him. Others congratulated him.

“The police aren’t trying to help them,” DiBenedetto said in an interview with the Indiana Daily Student. “No one’s really trying to help them, so I was kind of hoping that people would help out, and this would try and get someone’s attention that’s way higher up than I ever will be.”

The petition portrayed a complex juxtaposition between two transient Bloomington populations: IU students who are in town for a few years of college and the homeless.

Some students and members of local businesses near the park argue that the homeless people commit crimes in and near People’s Park.

According to an Indiana Daily Student analysis of Bloomington Police Department crime logs, police officers make almost daily stops near the park.

DiBenedetto’s petition asserted the homeless “have decided to make this park their home, starting fights, doing drugs, setting one another’s belongings on fire, and causing raucous 24/7,” and asked the park return its “original value” by placing inhabitants in better homes.

However, homelessness is a complex issue, af-

PEOPLE’S PARK CRIME

From Sept. 3 to Sept. 24, 13 arrests of people without permanent addresses were made after calls to People’s Park. There were 21 total counts from these arrests.

- 7 counts of public intoxication.
- 4 counts of possession of synthetic drug and paraphernalia.
- 3 counts of criminal trespassing.
- 2 counts of disorderly conduct.
- 1 counts of each battery, intimidation, panhandling, resisting law enforcement and public nudity.

SOURCE BPD
COMPILED BY JAMES BENEDICT | IDS

fecting real people in very different ways.

The petition, which received 673 supporters as of Monday evening, created a campus-wide discussion beyond the statistics and brought many nuanced perspectives into the spotlight.

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On a Saturday in September, college students stuck their heads out of a pick-up truck.

“People’s Park!” they, laughing as they passed the park and the group of people gathered on the benches and around the tables, shouted out.

Leprechaun John shook his head and reached down to pet his dog, Missy, as she drank the water in the bowl on the ground.

Leprechaun John moved to Indiana from California in 1985 with his mother when he was 22 to find work. He worked around Indiana before he came to Bloomington to work for IU’s janitorial staff 5 years ago, when he said the University fired him due to consolidating janitorial work. He’s been homeless ever since.

“Usually I come to a different park than here,” John said. “There’s a lot of idiots that hang out here.”

Leprechaun John, 52, said this is not the first time People’s Park has been under attack. Local bars and business owners downtown, he said, have tried in the past with petitions of their own.

“If they wanna weed out all the disrespectful, rude people, I’m all game for that, but this is called People’s Park for a reason,” John said. “It’s for everybody.”

When a reporter told him about DiBenedetto’s petition, John said he understood the ideas but didn’t like being judged.

“I’d tell him to come out here and sleep where I sleep,” John said. “Walk a mile in my shoes before you judge me.”

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REBECCA MEHLING | IDS
After a petition that was brought about by IU senior, Jo DiBenedetto, local restaurants and businesses as well as the homeless who sleep in People’s Park share their opinions about the petition.