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Urban Studies

Washington Square: The Green Needle

Living in center city Philadelphia can be challenging at times with the traffic, the noise, the crowds, and the lack of fresh air. It almost seems to constrict and take the life out of me. But within the huge haystack which is center city, there exists a green needle. This needle gives relief from the oceans of hay which are the bustling city streets. Washington Square is the needle so to speak. It is literally a breath of fresh air to be within the expanse of green grass and trees, large enough to let you forget about the gray city streets, and the noise of traffic, and the musky smell of city air.

In the early morning as I walk tiredly along seventh street toward my bus stop on Walnut Street, I always look forward to the refreshing sight of tall, powerful trees, and the wildlife that call it home. I cherish the short walk because it gives me a natural wakeup call as I realize that the walk is something to be cherished and not overlooked. The fresh air that I know I will not be able to experience once at the bus stop, the vibrant green color that looks majestic in comparison to the dull colors of cement and asphalt that would be to come, and finally the wide open spaces that make the subway commute on the broad street line seem dingy and confined.

But this green needle in a gray city haystack does more than just brighten up my morning commute to Masterman High School, it also provides a place where people can socialize, a place where people can go to in order to reflect, or just a place to get out and walk the dog.

Every morning Washington Square is not only used by me on my commute, but also by other people trying to escape to a greener, fresher area in order to get their morning rituals done. While I take in the sites of the towering elm trees shivering in the morning breeze, and the gray squirrels collecting nuts I also view the other temporary inhabitants of the square. The old women and men from the nearby china town area do their synchronized tai chi with grace and precision. The runners jog to the tunes of their ipods wearing short shorts, tight shirts and fancy looking running

shoes. The less ambitious of the park simply walk their dogs, or sit on the wooden benches and learn the latest news from the *Metro*, Philadelphia *Inquirer*, or the occasional New York *Times*. No matter what the morning activity, the green needle makes it more pleasurable and seems to give people the energy to get through the tough morning daze.

On the weekend during the afternoon, the square also acts as a green needle which attracts a different bunch of people. This mid-day crowd consists of people who simply want to enjoy the grass, sun, and space. One group is the lunch crowd. This group likes to lounge on the benches and eat delicious cuisine from the surrounding restaurants or occasionally they bring picnics and eat homemade goodies on blankets while chatting with friends. Then come the sunbathers who use the soft, lush, green grass in order to cushion their half naked bodies as they absorb the sun's rays, sometimes a little too much leaving them noticeably burned. And last but definitely not least come the Frisbee throwers who, dressed in casual college frat wear, entertain all with their antics and skill, or lack thereof.

The night life of the square is also very impressive with softly lit paths and the cool night breeze rustling the tree leaves, the green needle becomes magical. Elegantly dressed groups, wearing suits and gowns, take evening strolls, getting ready to enter elegant parties or enjoy the theatre. But at this time, the park is like its own theatre. Away from material parties, shows, and life it is a natural excursion that needs no admission fee. All it needs is an appreciative audience and it can relax, soothe, or even entertain as much as any night on the town. It is my needle in a haystack at night because it takes me away from the material world and lifestyle of the city, and brings me to a simpler and more pleasurable life of tranquility or hanging out with good friends.

Washington Square can be a lot of things to a lot of people. It can be a workout area for the physically active. It can be a lunch break spot for the hungry. It can be a soothing spa for the overworked and overstressed. Or it could even just be a nice escape from the city used to wake up on the morning commute. But whatever it is to whoever uses it, it is truly a green needle in a haystack.