

Wilma Browne

Good afternoon.

My name is Wilma Browne. I'm thankful to be here. And it's a pleasure to see the artwork of Fern Cunningham and Karen Eutemey installed in the General Edward O. Gourdin African American Veterans Memorial Park.

This park is the result of the vision of my husband, Ralph Browne, Jr., and other veterans of the 272nd Field Artillery Battalion, the last segregated unit in the U.S. Army.

Efforts to create the park began in 1996. An early non-profit board helped to guide its creation. Sitting on the board, in addition to my husband, were Edward Brooke, Fletcher Wiley, Judges Judith Dilday and Julian Houston, Marvin

Gilmore, and Edward O. Gourdin, Jr. Members of the 272nd Veterans Association who worked on the park's creation included Bill Vickers, Warren Brown, Charles Dawson, William Janey and many more. Most of whom are no longer with us. With broad support from the judicial community, Roxbury Main Streets and academia, which included Harvard University (Gourdin's Alma Mater), the park came into being.

Dedicated to Massachusetts African-American veterans, the park was called the Peace Park. At some point, however, the members of the 272nd decided that the park should memorialize the Olympian, the decorated soldier and the jurist Edward O. Gourdin, Commander of the 272nd and 372nd. The park was renamed in Gourdin's honor in 2010; Justice Edward O. Gourdin Veterans Memorial Park.

In 2003 the Organization of African American Veterans (OAAV) began holding annual veterans related programs at the park. In 2015, after my husband's passing, a cross section of community members established a working group that evolved into Veterans & Friends of Gourdin Memorial Park. That group's objective was complete the park by having art work installed that would memorialize Massachusetts African-American veterans. Today, that artwork consists of the statue of Gourdin and the ten bas relief portraits representing African American veterans who fought every war of this country since before the American Revolution.

But, the park is much more than the new landscaping and artwork. In 2020, many of the protest marches in Boston began in Roxbury convening in the park. And, it is so fitting that they did so since thousands of African-American veterans from the Civil War, World War I, World War II, Vietnam, plus

other wars were victims of racial assaults, death by lynching and much more.

This park creates an opportunity for our community, and others to know of the sacrifice, courage and struggle of Massachusetts African-American veterans throughout time and the significant role they continued to play in our community. Further, on behalf of Veterans & Friends, I'd like to extend our appreciation to Suffolk University Professor David Allison, and Suffolk's internship program for leading us to Sarah Lawton and Selvin Backert, who conducted vital historical research about Massachusetts African American Veterans on our behalf.

In closing, I want to first thank God for allowing me to see this day come to fruition, and on behalf of my husband, Ralph F. Browne, Jr., and my family, I want to thank everyone who

**aided in seeing his vision, the General Edward O. Gourdin
African-American Veterans Memorial Park, become a reality.**

Thank you