

## Enchanted Voodoo Forest

Written by Mark Sell, BT Contributor  
February 2019

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### Spiritual offerings, invasive plants, trash mar a local oasis



North Miami's popular Enchanted Forest Elaine Gordon Park (1725 NE 135th St.) is a place where families, joggers, seniors, and school and scout groups seek refuge from a bustling city.

Every October the park gets a little spooky, with a Halloween Fun Zone, nighttime hay rides, and family-friendly fall festivities.

When Johnson & Wales student Béatrice Noël started her work-study job at the park this past October, she regularly came upon spooky things not at all family friendly: voodoo offerings, including bodies of headless chickens, split coconuts lined up in careful rows, and closed jars with leaves contained in brown liquid. She was less than enchanted.

"I get the whole thing about religion, but this has nothing to do with freedom of expression," says Noël. "If you're going to slaughter your animals and make your sacrifices, that's your responsibility. My grand-uncle was a voodoo warlock in Haiti. So I get it. But you don't leave your stuff in the park."

Beyond that, Noël's work-study experience with the City of North Miami Parks and Recreation Department left her with the overwhelming sense that the city, its residents, and visitors are often not paying proper respect to this community treasure. In addition to the voodoo souvenirs left to appease spirits, the list includes strewn trash, invasive species that are strangling native plants, and failure to introduce more programs, provide better security, and staff the park

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properly.

When given a class assignment to write a letter to the editor, she wrote one on this very subject to *Biscayne Times* on January 14, which inspired further exploration.

The park offers many wonders: multiple paths through oak hammocks, the now- rare slash pine (that very “Dade County pine” harvested to near extinction for home building), popular pony rides and horse-riding lessons, picnic tables, pavilions, a walking bridge over Arch Creek, a manmade lake with a fountain, and views that would befit a French impressionist painting.

The park showcases Alan Gutierrez’s new \$30,000 sculpture of five-foot metal columns in 18 colors commissioned to celebrate the county’s LGBT history and accomplishments. It is a pet project of 20-year Councilman Scott Galvin, one of the state’s first openly gay politicians, who lives one block north.

Despite this, the park has its share of troubles: smash-and-grabs with burgled cars, lack of law enforcement, as well as the occasional animal carcasses, empty Corona bottles from the convenience store across the street, and lack of staff or constant security.

When the *BT* tried to visit the park around 11:00 a.m. January 17, police had blocked off access while trying to nab a car thief who had escaped into the park after totaling a stolen Nissan SUV at 143rd Street and NE 20th Avenue. Police had captured one suspect at the site of the accident, but the man who fled to the park was still at large.

Noël, age 43, has led a varied life, shuttling between her native Haiti and the United States before settling here permanently in 2002. She lives with her mother and brother on NE 135th Street east of Biscayne Boulevard, and has sung professionally, using her killer lyric soprano. She’s scheduled to graduate in 2021 and wants to pursue a law degree when she finishes.

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[letters@biscaynetimes.com](mailto:letters@biscaynetimes.com)