

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Mark Lee, *President*
Susan Sample, *Vice President*
Michele Fraga, *Secretary*
Thomas Horton, *Treasurer*
Evans Attwell
Chris Gonzalez
Anne Sung
Carla Wyatt

Executive Director:

Kathleen Ownby

Assistant Director:

Elizabeth Howley

SPARK Schools:

Houston I.S.D.
Almeda, Anderson, Arabic Immersion, Ashford, Askew, Baker Montessori, Bellfort E.C.C., Berry, Braeburn, Briscoe, Browning, Carrillo, Clifton M.S., Condit, Cornelius, Daily, Davila, Deady M.S., Edison M.S., Emerson, Field, Fleming M.S., Franklin, Gallegos, Garden Oaks Montessori, Garden Villas, Golfcrest, Hamilton M.S., Hartsfield, Harvard, Helms, J. P. Henderson, Herrera, Hogg M.S., Holland M.S., Horn, Houston International Academy, Jane Long Academy, Jefferson, Kashmere Gardens, Ketelsen, Lockhart, Looscan, Lyons, Mading, Mandarin Immersion Magnet, McGowen, McReynolds M.S., Memorial, Milne, Montgomery, Moreno, Osborne, Park Place, Parker, Petersen, Piney Point, Poe, Port Houston, Billy Reagan K-8, Reynolds, River Oaks, Roberts, Robinson, Rodriguez, School at St. George Place, Sinclair, Stevens, Stevenson M.S., Sutton, Tijerina, Tinsley, Travis, Twain, Walnut Bend, Waltrip H.S., W. University, Westbury H.S., Wharton K-8, Whidby

Aldine I.S.D.

Caraway, Carroll, Dunn, Harris Academy, Marcella, Stovall M.S.

Alief I.S.D.

Alexander, Best, Bush, Chambers, Chancellor, Collins, Cummings, Hearne, Horn, Kennedy, Landis, Liestman, Mahanay, Martin, Miller Int., Outley, Smith, Sneed Elem., & Alief Community Garden

Channelview I.S.D.

Crenshaw, Hamblen, Harvey Brown Elem.

Clear Creek I.S.D.

McWhirter, Wedgwood Elem.

Crosby I.S.D.

Drew Elem.

CyFair I.S.D.

Frazier, Duryea, Hancock, Holmsley, Liedler, Millsap, Tipps Elem.

Fort Bend I.S.D.

Blue Ridge-Briargate, Mission West, Ridgemont, Rosa Parks Elem.

Galena Park I.S.D.

Cimarron Elem.

Goose Creek C.I.S.D.

Harlem Elem.

Huffman I.S.D.

Huffman Elem.

Humble I.S.D.

Fall Creek, Lakeshore Elem.

Katy I.S.D.

Franz, Memorial Parkway, Winborn Elem.

Klein I.S.D.

Kaiser Elem.

Pasadena I.S.D.

Bailey, Beverly Hills Int., Frazier, Freeman, Garfield, Hancock, Jensen, Kruse, Mattheys, Meador, Parks, Pearl Hall, South Shaver, Sparks Elem.

Sheldon I.S.D.

Carroll, Royalwood Elem.

Spring I.S.D.

Hoyland, Thompson Elem.

Spring Branch I.S.D.

Bendwood, Buffalo Creek, Cedar Brook, Hollibrook, Meadow Wood, Northbrook M.S., Nottingham, Pine Shadows, Ridgecrest, Shadow Oaks, Sherwood, Spring Forest M.S., Spring Woods M.S., Terrace, Valley Oaks, Wilchester, Woodview Elem.

Charter Schools

The Lawson Academy, YES Prep-East End, YES Prep-Gulfton, Yzaguirre Schools for Success



NEWS RELEASE

For More Information Contact:

Elizabeth Howley, Assistant Director, SPARK School Park Program
832-393-0910, Elizabeth@sparkpark.org
www.sparkpark.org

SPARK Honors Kathleen Ownby for 37 Years of Transformational Leadership

HOUSTON, TX June 6, 2025– SPARK, the innovative nonprofit that transforms school playgrounds into vibrant public parks, honors longtime Executive Director **Kathleen Ownby** for her remarkable **37 years of service** to the organization and the Houston community.

Ownby began working with SPARK in 1988 when she returned to Houston from Tulsa, Oklahoma. Inspired by the mission and encouraged by her mother, the late Council Member Eleanor Tinsley, Kathleen initially volunteered in her mother’s office. She quickly became an integral part of SPARK and was appointed Executive Director in 1991.

Under Ownby’s leadership, SPARK has grown into a nationally recognized model for public-private partnerships, creating more than **250 SPARK Parks** across **18 school districts** and **4 charter networks** in the Greater Houston area. These parks provide essential green space for students during the school day and serve as community parks after school, on weekends, and holidays. To date, SPARK has raised over **\$45 million** to support the creation and improvement of school parks. SPARK is a pioneer in the Green Schoolyard movement.

Founded in response to the **1983 Green Ribbon Committee Report**, SPARK—short for “School Park”—launched its first five parks in Houston ISD by 1988. Over the decades, SPARK has expanded to schools across **Harris and Fort Bend counties**, most recently adding **Spring ISD** and **Cy-Fair ISD** in 2024.

SPARK’s impact extends beyond play spaces. Since **2001**, the organization has published the **SPARK Art Calendar**, showcasing local artists with student-involved public art in newly dedicated parks. The project engages students in creative expression and community pride, with over 15,000 calendars printed annually thanks to the continued support of the **C.T. Bauer Foundation**.

In 2010, a collaboration with **Charming Charlie** brought innovation to SPARK’s art initiatives. Students from 70 schools turned truckloads of donated recycled jewelry into dazzling “SPARK-ling” art collages, many of which were exhibited at the Houston Public Library and featured in the 2014 calendar. Some of the recycled jewelry even made appearances on art cars during the city’s celebrated Art Car Parade.



Another milestone of Ownby's tenure is the **Park Desert Initiative**, launched in 2016 with initial funding from the **Houston Endowment, Kinder Foundation, and Powell Foundation**. The campaign targets neighborhoods where residents lack walkable access to parks. Phases 2 and 3 included additional support from the **Brown and Cullen Foundations**. Once complete in 2027, the initiative will have added **60 new SPARK Parks** and revitalized **40 existing ones**.

As shade becomes more important on playgrounds, SPARK is happy to have partnered with **Trees for Houston** since 1990 on planting native Texas trees in SPARK Parks.

"From modest beginnings to a regional network of over 165 active parks, SPARK's success is a direct reflection of Kathleen's vision, energy, and devotion to community," said SPARK Board Chair Mark Lee.

Kathleen Ownby's legacy is deeply rooted in the neighborhoods of Houston and in the families and children who benefit daily from safe, accessible, and beautiful outdoor spaces. She is celebrated not only as a leader, but as a community builder.

Kathleen was honored alongside her family, including her husband **David Ownby**, son **Dan Ownby** and daughter-in-law **Allison**, daughter **Emily** and son-in-law **John Kirksey**.

Those helping the SPARK Board of Directors celebrate the occasion were:

Harris County Clerk Teneshia Hudspeth

Harris County Precinct 4 Commissioner Lesley Briones

Harris County Treasurer Carla Wyatt (also on SPARK Board)

City Controller Chris Hollins

Nancy Kinder and Guy Hagstette, Kinder Foundation

Katherine Osborne Valdez and Nancy Powell Moore, Powell Foundation

Bao-Long Chu, Houston Endowment

Ryan Smith and Chereze Therkildsen, The Brown Foundation

Elizabeth Love and Debbie Mueller, Jacob & Terese Hershey Foundation

Marilyn Monroe, C.T. Bauer Foundation