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## Levy County Extension director is honored by island nation

### *Albert Fuller Park is unveiled*



**Look up. Achieve goals. This element of the 15 different elements in a ropes course is part of experiential learning. It is a part of the ropes course that Levy County Extension Director Albert Fuller helped establish on the island of Curacao, formerly known as Netherlands Antilles.**

*Photos Provided*

**By Jeff M. Hardison**

**© Aug. 21, 2015 @ 1:17 p.m.**

**BRONSON** – Levy County Extension Director Albert Fuller said he was surprised and humbled by an island nation naming a park to honor him this summer.

That event in June is the culmination of a long series of interactions that happened during several years of his involvement with Curacao. This recognition of Fuller relates directly to the concept of experiential learning. It goes beyond that, though, because it also is about the human condition, love for other people and doing whatever can be done to help children enjoy that part of their lives.

Fuller was instrumental in the completion of a 15-element ropes course where its construction in Curacao was celebrated in June at the park named “Albert Fuller Park.”

Curacao is an island country in the southern Caribbean Sea, approximately 40 miles north of the Venezuelan coast. It is a constituent country of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

Formally called the Country of Curacao, it includes the main island and the uninhabited island of Klein Curacao (“Little Curacao”). It has a population of more than 150,000 individuals on an area that is approximately 171 square miles. Its capital is Willemstad.

Prior to the dissolution of the Netherlands Antilles on Oct. 10, 2010, Curacao was administered as the “Island Territory of Curacao,” one of five island territories of the former Netherlands.

Looking at one small part of this island’s long and intriguing history, is where Fuller fits in and where a park now bears his name.

At 65 years old, Fuller has been helping children through 4H and the University of Florida’s Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences for many decades now. His recent four-day trip to Curacao was funded by the island nation, and he thought he was just going to help re-open the ropes course that had initially been built a number of years ago.

This course has 15 climbing or climb-on elements, and it can be used not just for physical exercise but for mental calisthenics too. The rope course’s elements can be thought of in a metaphorical sense to compare with things that a person faces in life, Fuller said.

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**People attend the event where the park sign is unveiled.**



**The park sign is about to be shown.**



**Levy County Extension Director Albert Fuller sees the park named to honor him**

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**Albert Fuller and other honored guests stand near the sign that heralds the name of the park.**

This ropes course is geared for anyone who is 12 years or older.

The story of the park being named “Albert Fuller Park” in Curacao goes back at least to 1991, when Fuller was a participant in a three-year program funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF).

The WKKF has a longstanding commitment to community and civic engagement, which is grounded in the belief that people have the inherent capacity to solve their own problems, and that social transformation is within the reach of all communities.

In this National Youth Development Leaders Institute, Fuller and 34 other Americans were chosen from across the nation to participate. They met in the United States and in other countries around the globe as they went on learning excursions to discover the plight of children on an international scale.

Back then, Fuller saw many different cultures. In Africa, he saw children who were living in mud huts. They may have enjoyed a life comparable to affluent American children, he said, because the village children found enrichment in the most simplistic toys.

While the children might have led relatively happy lives, even without battery-powered toys, the parents suffered in abject poverty.

“Their parents were not so lucky,” Fuller said in regard to the children in African villages he visited in the early 1990s. “The men were in economic slavery. Their custom required men to work. They would go into the city and work to earn just enough to take care of themselves.

“The men did not earn enough to help their families,” he continued. “They were away from their families all week long and they ended up with nothing to support their families.”

The women in these communal villages grew crops and raised livestock like goats and chickens for food, he said. But the men were enslaved to their own cultural custom, and their employers – the economic elite – who exploited those men at every turn of the pages in their adult lives.

Fuller networked with other members of the 35-person team from America as well as with other individuals during this sojourn to discover more about children’s living conditions in the

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world.

Fuller had met a man from Curacao who had found a way into a child development program. The man asked Fuller if he would volunteer to share some of the things Fuller had shared with other National Youth Development Leaders Institute members by coming to the island.

In 1993, when the ropes course was first completed, Fuller shared the stage with the prime minister of Netherlands Antilles (the name before becoming Curacao) and those two men jointly gave the keynote address.

Fuller volunteered over the period of several years to help the leaders of youth in Netherlands Antilles and then as it became Curacao, including the renovation of the ropes course. Last December, and then in January and March, Fuller had gone to Curacao. He was there in January of 2015 for the official opening of the ropes course.

The invitation to the island in June resulted in the surprise that humbled Fuller – the naming of a park in his honor. Fuller likes ropes courses.

One purpose of the ropes course is for team building and leadership development, Fuller said. Elements of the course are used as metaphors for things in people's lives, he said.

For instance, overcoming the fear of climbing or of heights can be applied to think of overcoming other fears, such as a fear of public speaking or apprehension about going into the next grade of school, or some other challenge a person may assume in life.

"We help the participant overcome the physical challenge and relate that process to the many other mental and physical challenges," he said.

For instance, a person who is taking on the challenge of climbing on the climbing tower can think of this as taking the next step in some other process, like accepting a management role at work. As they take the next step going up, they are reminded to keep looking up.

Going up the next rung and seeing that immediately in front of the climber, where their focus is on the nearby object helps alleviate any fear or apprehension they may feel if they look down at the ground where they started.

There are low ropes course elements, which are easier, and there are higher ropes course elements. Mastering the lower course first is a foundation to continuing on. The lower set is used by more people.

In life, Fuller said, if a person worries about what might happen, then they will never get to do the things they would like to happen. They become limited, or even paralyzed, by their fears.

Fuller's exposure to ropes courses began in the 1980s when he was at an Outward Bound School in North Carolina on a learning excursion. Fuller was with a group of University of Florida faculty who were there looking at team programs to motivate older kids to stay in 4-H.

"I was walking across a balance beam that was 40 feet in the air," Fuller said. "The instructor told me to focus on what I want. If I wanted to fall down, then I would look down. If I wanted to succeed on getting to the other side, then I should focus on that.

"This simple principle," Fuller continued, "made it so much easier for me to traverse that balance beam that it was almost as if I was walking on level ground. That principle hooked me, and I've been working with people and ropes courses ever since that time."

Fuller lives what he teaches.

4-H is a youth organization with the mission of "engaging youth to reach their fullest potential while advancing the field of youth development." The name represents four personal development areas of focus for the organization: head, heart, hands and health.

The goal of 4-H is to develop citizenship, leadership, responsibility and life skills of youth through experiential learning programs and a positive youth development approach. Though typically thought of as an agriculturally focused organization as a result of its history, 4-H also focuses on citizenship, healthy living, science, engineering and technology programs.

The 4-H motto is "To make the best better." The slogan is "Learn by doing."

In regard to learning by doing, and ropes courses, Fuller said that teaching and learning by experience is not always easier than having a learner read or telling him or her something; but it

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is a more definitive way of installing principles that the educators want to convey into the minds of people.

“This way, they experience it,” Fuller said. “And they relate that to other real life experiences; hence, a metaphor.”

Looking up, and maintaining a focus on success has worked for Fuller, he said, and he knows it works for other people as well.

He sees ropes course learning as a method to help learners overcome “the illusion of failure.”

“It is only a failure if we do not learn from the experience,” Fuller said. “It is impossible to fail as long as you keep trying. You fail only if you give up.”

Fuller spoke about Sir Edmund Percival Hillary, who on May 29, 1953, with Nepalese Sherpa mountaineer Tenzing Norgay, became the first climbers to reach the summit of Mount Everest.

When Hillary was being honored for that accomplishment, Fuller said, he paused and looked back at a picture of the mountain. Speaking to the mountain, he let that object know that some of his friends had died seeking to conquer it. And he had done that. As for that mountain, it was as big as it would ever be, but Hillary said he will continue to grow.

And so people who use ropes courses for team building and to relate their success in a metaphorical manner to other aspects of their lives are bound to see that they are continuing to grow. One way to expand one’s ability is through experiencing educational excursions – whether at home or on an island in another hemisphere.

As for Fuller and the park named after him, he said it was a humbling experience. He is grateful to the people of Curacao for allowing him the opportunity to assist others there who will help young people grow mentally and physically.

As for the former ropes course at the Levy County Extension campus in Bronson, Fuller said some large Pileated Woodpeckers sought food in the wooden poles that are required to hold main parts of the course.

The birds damaged the poles to where they cannot be used safely, he said. Levy County is not currently in an economic position to replace those relatively expensive wooden poles, Fuller said.