Transforming lives by transforming public space

Annual Report

2013
Introduction

Pogo Park is a nonprofit grassroots community effort in Richmond, California’s Iron Triangle – one of the toughest, most underserved inner-city neighborhoods in the U.S. – to transform its forgotten and little-used parks and playgrounds into safe, green, vibrant public spaces for children to play and families to gather.

This effort is led and staffed by a team of long-term Iron Triangle residents, with help from friends and supporters all over the Bay Area and beyond.

History

Founded in 2007, Pogo Park began by focusing its efforts on transforming Elm Playlot, a half-acre “pocket park” in the heart of Richmond’s Iron Triangle - a neighborhood struggling with the devastating effects of poverty, pollution, unemployment, violence, blight, beleaguered schools, and a pervasive sense of hopelessness.

To re-imagine and rebuild Elm Playlot, Pogo Park recruited, hired, trained, and empowered the Elm Playlot Action Committee (EPAC), a core team of Iron Triangle residents – the people who know their neighborhood best – to plan, design, build, and manage the park themselves. In 2009, Pogo Park and EPAC created a radical new design for Elm Playlot. In 2010, Pogo Park partnered with MIG, a Berkeley-based urban planning and design firm, and the city of Richmond to secure a $1.94 million capital grant from the State of California Parks Department to rebuild Elm Playlot based on EPAC's design.

In the summer of 2011, while waiting to secure the permits to begin construction (a process that would ultimately take two years), Pogo Park built a “Pop-Up Park” at Elm Playlot consisting of temporary play structures (a sandbox, hillside slide, stage, and “Global Village” of child-sized houses from around the world). Working with the Iron Triangle's Scientific Art Studio (the company that built the iconic oversized mitt at the San Francisco Giants ballpark and the new playground at the San Francisco Zoo), EPAC designed and built all the play elements at Elm’s Pop-Up Park themselves. They also staffed the park Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. and provided free play programming (arts and crafts, chess club, dance, gardening, reading, unstructured free play) to thousands of the Bay Area’s most vulnerable children. The Pop-Up Park was an instant hit.

Also in 2011, Pogo Park led the effort to secure a second State Parks Department capital grant – this time for $5 million to design and build "Unity Park" on two sections of the Richmond Greenway, a former railroad line that lies along the southern border of the Iron Triangle neighborhood. Now in the planning stages, Unity Park will be designed and built with the same resident-driven design process Pogo Park used to design and build Elm Playlot.

In 2012 Pogo Park expanded its play programming for Iron Triangle children to include activities on the Greenway and laid the foundation for the creation of Harbour-8 Park, a new playground and community hub in an abandoned two-block section of the Greenway. Pogo Park also acquired a house that sits adjacent to Elm Playlot and began transforming it into a park office. In the summer of 2012, Elm Playlot was the number one distribution center for the school district’s free lunch program, serving 9,000 meals to hungry neighborhood children.
A New Model for Community Transformation

Pogo Park is about much more than playgrounds. It is about using the transformation of underused city parks to transform communities and make them healthier. Our unique approach combines two distinct but interrelated strategies: child development and community development.

**Child Development:** Parents of every race, ethnicity, and economic condition share one trait: hope for their children’s future. But the people of the Iron Triangle, like residents of under-served inner-city neighborhoods all over the U.S., have seen a procession of failed efforts to solve the chronic problems of poverty, ineffective schools, and unsafe streets that imperil their children’s healthy development.

Great parks and great playgrounds are potent medicine for sick neighborhoods, affording children and youth profound health benefits. Rich, active outdoor play is the “mother’s milk” of healthy development. Decades of research shows that such play improves physical and psychological health as well as language skills and boosts social skills, empathy, creativity, and imagination. Children who play are less aggressive, show more self-control and higher levels of thinking and have fewer attention disorders than non-players. Active outdoor play is a highly effective way to prevent and reverse childhood obesity.

Pogo Park makes playgrounds safe and welcoming by staffing them with playworkers, or park stewards. These trained adults watch over the space as a parent would watch over her child and create enriched play environments that spark children’s imagination and initiative.

**Community Development:** What makes Pogo Park unique is that we empower local residents to take the lead role in transforming broken parks in their own neighborhood. However simple this approach may seem, it is revolutionary. Rather than the old model where “experts” (professionals in landscape architecture, environmental design, urban planning) design and build parks for the people, Pogo Park’s approach is to hire and train local residents to design and build the parks themselves.

By directing dollars for capital projects back into the local community, Pogo Park's model works like a mini stimulus plan in neighborhoods like Richmond’s Iron Triangle. The resulting empowerment creates a sense of ownership that is the essential ingredient of long-term success. At Elm Playlot, our pilot site, the change is striking. Because the community designed and is building this park, the neighbors defend it ferociously. They clean it and the surrounding streets daily. They report suspicious activity. If graffiti appears overnight, it is removed immediately.
Projects

Elm Playlot: The original Pogo Park, a half-acre park in the heart of the Iron Triangle. Virtually abandoned when we began work there, Elm Playlot lies within a 3-minute walk of approximately 3,500 children age 11 and younger who were trapped inside, behind locked doors, watching TV and playing video games, because there was no safe or stimulating place to play outside.

Harbour-8 Park: A formerly abandoned two-block section of the Richmond Greenway that lies within two blocks of five schools. Pogo Park has created a consortium of local businesses to work together on transforming this space into a vibrant playground and community gathering space.

Unity Park: Currently in the planning stages, this park will eventually become the "High Line of the West," with community gardens, playgrounds, and walking and biking trails that will connect to the Ohlone Greenway in the east and to the San Francisco Bay Trail in the west.

Yellow Brick Road: Conceived by the youth of the Iron Triangle neighborhood, this project will identify and create a network of walking and biking routes that give children and adults safe access to the new parks and playgrounds that are now being built and planned. The California Department of Transportation recently awarded the city of Richmond a $268,000 grant to create a master plan for the Yellow Brick Road in the Iron Triangle neighborhood.
2013 Accomplishments

- The Trust for Public Land selects Pogo Park’s Harbour-8 Park on the Richmond Greenway as its first “Park Activation” project. TPL provides a $150,000 grant to plan, design, and build Harbour-8 Park the first such park selected for this program by TPL in the Western region.

- Major reconstruction of Elm Playlot begins; Pogo Park programming and operations are relocated to a new office at Harbour-8 Park.

- Pogo Park employs 16-to-21-year-olds from the Richmond Summer Youth Employment Program to help with Harbour-8 cleanup and creates the Pogo Park All-Stars, a summer program for 11-to-13-year-old neighborhood boys who are too old for children’s programs and too young for summer youth programs. Both programs are highly popular and successful.

- Pogo Park participates in a new partnership with the city of Richmond and the national nonprofit KaBoom! to build a new playground at Belding-Garcia Park in Belding Woods, a neighborhood that is adjacent to Iron Triangle.

- Pogo Park organizes a memorial fund and neighborhood car wash to raise money for the family of Lincoln Plair, a 20-year-old Pogo Park staff member who loses his life while protecting two young children from a random shooting near the park. These efforts raise more than $13,000. Pogo Park also organizes a candlelight anti-violence vigil in Lincoln’s memory and facilitates counseling and healing activities in the neighborhood.
• Pogo Park establishes a partnership with the Lawrence Construction Company to build a new office at #1 Harbour Way South on the Richmond Greenway, at no cost to Pogo Park.

• Pogo Park works with the city of Richmond and urban planners Fehr & Peers and Local Government Commission to begin planning the Yellow Brick Road a project designed to create and maintain safe walking and biking routes that link key community assets of the Iron Triangle neighborhood together (schools, parks, churches, community center, transportation hubs, medical offices and shopping center).

• Play and educational programming for the children of the Iron Triangle continues throughout the year with all-day daily activities during summer and school vacations. These include the pop-up children’s playground on Martin Luther King Day at Harbour-8 Park, sports and games, arts and crafts, Free Haircut Day at Elm Playlot, nature exploration and study, designing and building a clubhouse on the Greenway, and serving lunch every day on the Greenway during the summer with three neighborhood chefs making healthy meals.
Impact

Child and youth development: We have clear evidence that since Pogo Park began its work, more Iron Triangle children are playing outdoors for longer periods and with an increased level of physical movement and exercise. Over the first three years of play programming at Elm Playlot, the number of children coming to the park regularly increased by 170%. The length of time spent at each visit grew from 41 to 56 minutes a 37% increase.

The Pogo Park All-Stars: This summer program for 11-to-13-year-old boys of color positively affects a group of young people who are at a critical developmental stage: too old for elementary-school-age children’s activities, too young for paid work, and badly in need of constructive outdoor projects that enable them to learn the skills of teamwork and collaboration. Begun in the summer of 2013, the All-Stars program promises to become an essential resource for Iron Triangle families.

Health and well-being, including healthy eating: Although outdoor play and exercise are essential to improving the well-being of Iron Triangle children, access to healthful, nutritious food is equally important. During 2013 Pogo Park installed a drinking fountain at Elm Playlot with clean, fresh water something the park had never had and used it to educate neighborhood children about the benefits of drinking water instead of sugary drinks. Every day of the summer, Pogo Park provided free lunches of healthy, fresh food prepared by neighborhood cooks to children and youth at the Harbour-8 Park on the Greenway.

Economic development—job creation and training: In the last four years, Pogo Park has employed 55 local residents who face serious barriers to employment and directed $500,000 in wages back into the neighborhood surrounding Elm Playlot. These jobs pay a living wage between $18 and $23 per hour. Pogo Park’s impact is clearly visible in the lives of the local residents we have hired.

Through our partnerships with local businesses like Scientific Art Studio and Lawrence Construction Inc. Pogo Park creates opportunities for local residents to learn valuable skills in planning, design, construction, and fabrication.

Crime and violence prevention: The Pogo Park team realized that before they could make Elm Playlot a safe space for children, they first had to deal with the row of vacant, boarded-up houses facing the park that were magnets for drug dealing and crime. In recent years approximately half of the homicides in the city took place in the Iron Triangle. Parents were extremely wary of allowing their children to be outdoors. In collaboration with the Richmond Police Department, Pogo Park organized a series of community meetings that led to consistent raids on the worst drug house. Pogo Park and the police worked with Richmond’s city attorney to pressure the landlord to evict his drug-dealing tenants. After a year of sustained collaborative effort, the drug house was closed, cleaned up, and occupied by a local family.

Pogo Park also worked closely with the city to secure a $3.6 million HUD grant to acquire and renovate the vacant houses that surrounded Elm Playlot. Today, every single house facing the park has been renovated and is now occupied by local families. The Pogo Park team, working at the Elm Playlot office every day and in constant contact with the police, has become a vital intermediary for crime prevention. Neighbors come to the Pogo Park office to report their concerns and the team relays these reports. Since Pogo Park began work, there has not been a single incident of violence or vandalism at Elm Playlot.

Celebrating community and cultural diversity through public art: Staff artists Richard Muro and Jose Juan Reyes as well as visiting artists have created stunning murals, posters, and signs at Pogo Park’s project sites. Some of these public art works like the memorial for slain staff member Lincoln Plair celebrate the lives of local heroes and heroines and create a visual focus for important neighborhood events like the Elm Playlot vigil to end violence.
## The Pogo Park Index

**Facts about Richmond, the Iron Triangle, and Pogo Park’s impact on the community**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fact</th>
<th>Value</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment rate in the Iron Triangle neighborhood</td>
<td>33.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unemployment rate of young African-American men in Richmond</td>
<td>36%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of local residents who have been employed by Pogo Park</td>
<td>55</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wages earned by local residents on Pogo Park projects in last 4 years</td>
<td>Over $500,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of school-age children who live within walking distance of Pogo Park’s three project sites in the Iron Triangle</td>
<td>5,552</td>
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<tr>
<td>Children of color as percentage of all Iron Triangle children</td>
<td>97%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percentage of Iron Triangle children living in poverty</td>
<td>95%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percentage of Iron Triangle children who are overweight or obese</td>
<td>Over 50%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percentage of Richmond children diagnosed with asthma</td>
<td>27% (vs. 15% in Calif.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percentage increase in the number of children using Elm Playlot after first three years of Pogo Park’s presence here</td>
<td>170%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percentage of neighborhood elementary school children qualifying for free or reduced-price school lunch</td>
<td>98%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of meals served to hungry children at Elm Playlot in 2012 summer programs</td>
<td>9,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of local children and youth served or employed in Pogo Park summer projects</td>
<td>1,500</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of local residents who have participated in some way in the design, planning, and building of 3 Pogo Park projects in the Iron Triangle</td>
<td>Over 1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of incidents of violence and vandalism at Elm Playlot since Pogo Park began its work here</td>
<td>ZERO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total to date of park/playground construction grants secured by Pogo Park for the City of Richmond to invest in the Iron Triangle</td>
<td>Over $8 million</td>
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Board of Directors

Galen Hoskin, President, is an investment analyst and senior vice president of Capital World Investors, a division of Capital Research and Management Company, focusing on semiconductor and consumer electronic companies in Asia. He is also a vice president of the New Perspective Fund. Galen received an M.B.A. from Columbia Business School.

Denise Yamamoto, Chief Financial Officer, began working in the field of social entrepreneurship soon after receiving her master’s degree in business administration from U.C. Berkeley. Denise was a Farber Fellow and business director at CVE, Inc., a San Francisco nonprofit that provides jobs and job training to people with mental health disabilities. Prior to business school, she worked for six years in San Francisco for Barclays Global Investors, most recently as the international equity portfolio manager in the firm’s Alpha Strategies Group. Currently Denise serves on Bay Area Regional Board for BUILD.

Toody Maher, Secretary, is an artist, inventor, and entrepreneur. She graduated from U.C. Berkeley in 1983 and secured the distribution rights to Swatch Watch in the 11 Western states. Afterward, she started another company, Fun Products, which created the world’s first clear telephone with lights (named Fortune Magazine’s Product of the Year in 1990). In 1990, Toody was named Inc. Magazine’s Entrepreneur of the Year.

Later, she became the Business Director at Juma Ventures, a San Francisco nonprofit that provides jobs and job training to youth at risk.

Working on a project at UCLA to translate scientific research into formats that people can actually use to increase overall health and well being in communities, she realized how invaluable well-designed and managed parks could be to children, families, and their communities. This realization led her to found Pogo Park in 2007.

Gus Newport, Board Member, is a social justice activist and community/economic development consultant who has worked for several foundations and served on the faculties of M.I.T., Yale University, the University of California Santa Cruz, the University of Massachusetts Boston, and Portland State University. Gus served as the mayor of Berkeley, California from 1979 to 1986. During his tenure, he served on the advisory board of the U.S. Conference of Mayors and chaired its subcommittee on education and employment. In addition, he was the vice president of the U.S. delegation to the World Peace Council. He is currently on the leadership committee of the National Council of Elders, an organization made up of persons over 65 who played major roles in the pivotal movements of the 20th century, including civil rights, women’s rights, environmental rights, farm workers’ rights, and gay and lesbian rights.
Staff

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*Debbie Polito*: Operations Manager  
*Kirsten Negus*: Director of Special Projects  
*Sundiata Sidibe*: Communications Manager  
*Ed Miller*: Communications, Research & Development  
*Porter Sexton*: Development

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