

# EAST BAY TIMES

## News

### **Community Profile: Richmond resident working to create safe spaces to play**



By [KARINA IOFFEE](#) |

PUBLISHED: April 13, 2017 at 6:00 am | UPDATED: April 13, 2017 at 7:08 am

**RICHMOND** — When James Anderson was growing up in Richmond’s Iron Triangle, a poor neighborhood that gets its name from railroad tracks that crisscross the area, there weren’t many places a kid could run around safely. The streets were ruled by gangs, meaning the children stayed indoors whenever possible.

Anderson's story is not unique: His father was absent and his mother, "a good woman," turned to drugs as a refuge from poverty and violence, Anderson recalled. The family was evicted from their home and went to live with an aunt. At 15, Anderson joined the young men on the corner, peddling dope and dodging bullets.

"I was trying to find a way out, but couldn't," he said. "That was all I knew."

In 2004 Anderson was sent to prison for 16 months for selling cocaine. Then, three years ago, he had a revelation. He could continue down his ruinous path, and likely die, or give up drugs and choose life. He opted for the latter.

Today, Anderson, now 44, is employed by [Pogo Park](#), an organization working to increase the number of play areas for Richmond's children. Since 2010, the nonprofit has built two playgrounds in the city, including Pogo Park #1, an elaborate playground where children can swing from a zipline, roll on a grassy meadow, climb giant beehive-like structures and play in a stream.

The park is more like a community center than just another playground. It is staffed by local residents every single day and offers activities like chess classes, gardening and even Zumba for adults. Pogo Park, located at 7th and Elm streets, also organizes family trips to Muir Woods and Yosemite, outings that many children would never be able to experience on their own.

"Pogo Park gives kids a place for safety, love and opportunity," Anderson said. "If I had something like that when I was little, it would have really helped me."

**Watch a video about the making of Pogo Park:**

<https://vimeo.com/169910129>

While other residents clean the park, run programs and distribute free meals to children, Anderson's role has been to help build playground structures, as part of a partnership with [Scientific Arts Studio](#), a design and fabrication shop in Richmond. There, Anderson and other Iron Triangle residents have learned how to build everything from slides, picnic benches and fantastical climbing structures that look more at home at Burning Man than at a city park.

Today he not only gets a decent paycheck, he is also learning sought-after skills like welding and iron working.

"All the young men in the neighborhood look at James and say 'If he can do it, so can we,'" said Toody Maher, executive director of Pogo Park. "People need to see opportunity and this gives them that."

Since 2007, Pogo Park has hired more than 100 Iron Triangle residents and invested more than \$16 million into the neighborhood in the form of state and local grants, according to Maher. Instead of hiring outside urban designers, planners and construction workers, the organization uses local residents for the work.

Safe places for children to play, something so many communities consider a basic right, are vital for healthy development, [according to the American Academy of Pediatrics](#). They help reduce childhood obesity, a big problem in low-income neighborhoods, and boost social skills by helping children learn how to cooperate and negotiate with others, the organization has found. Research also shows that children who play are less aggressive, show more self-control and have fewer attention disorders.

“Playgrounds and parks are the most underrated, yet the most essential places in a city,” Maher said. “They are the true watering hole of a neighborhood where people from all walks of life meet.”

For Anderson, Pogo Park has meant not only a job, but a new lease on life. His children, ages 8, 11 and 15, now play there, and working to make his neighborhood better has made his children and wife look at him with new eyes.

“Instead of just watching what’s going on at the park from across the street, I am a part of it and giving back to my community,” Anderson said. “It’s a blessing to be a part of.”

