

HUFFPOST GREEN

Pogo -- A Spark in the Park

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The rise of Pogo Parks deserves Hollywood treatment. Brilliant and improbable, vital and near triumphant. It's a story, though unfinished, that promises in its logic defying detail to warm hearts and change lives. Don't get me wrong. There is still a lot of work and it needs help. But I'm not exaggerating about the changing of lives.

Pogo Parks, including the Greenway Project, are located in and around the Iron Triangle of Richmond, California. It's called the Iron Triangle because it is where three major railroad tracks meet to form a rough triangle. But it might as well be the lead triangle or homicide hollow. The Iron Triangle is a Social Worker's nightmare, an impenetrable locus of poverty and crime. The median family income is \$26,000. Violence is a way of life. Crime is not just pervasive; it is a horrific part of the existential fabric. As Rebecca Brown in her study "Issues of Violence, Incarceration and Re-entry in Richmond, California" (May, 2010; pp 7-9) summarizes, "The level of community violence and destabilization scars the entire neighborhood. It scars what it doesn't kill - as the homicide rate is one of the nation's worst." During World War II, Richmond briefly flourished as a ship building center. When this tide went out and the jobs dried up, it left unemployment high and families broken.

The view from outside Richmond was clouded by these harsh realities. But where others saw crime and social mayhem, the neighborhood's residents, like Toody Maher saw the richness of community and potential for growth - people stronger for what they had to encounter and survive.

After graduating from UC Berkeley, Toody played professional volleyball in Europe. She came back to California wanting to get rich . . . and almost did! She returned to Southern California where she grew up and pioneered the launch of Switzerland's Swatch Watch on the west coast. Through her enterprise, creativity and hard work, regional sales sky rocketed from zero to \$30 million in 3 years. Shifting gears, she designed Fortune Magazine's 1990 Product of the Year - the world's first clear telephone with lights. That same year she was named Inc Magazine's Entrepreneur of the Year.

But the voracious dogs of monopolistic capitalism began to nip at her heels. Large corporations moved in on her turf, copied her innovations and sued her to try to usurp her market. Heartbroken, Toody settled and regrouped in the Bay Area.

Meanwhile, investment giant Kohlberg Kravis Roberts' George Roberts sought Toody out. After his legendary leveraged buyout of Safeway Food Markets, Roberts branched into social entrepreneurship. Roberts founded and chaired boards of directors of non-profit organizations such as the Roberts Enterprise Development Fund that focused on job creation. He set up a foundation to assist people having trouble economically, particularly the young, who were hard to employ. Based on her innovative track record, Roberts wanted Toody to set up non-profit businesses for unemployed kids.

In between projects, Toody and her partner had made their home in Richmond, probably the most affordable Bay Area City. They fell in love with the parks near their home. Richmond has 56 parks, some like the nearby Elm Playlot were painfully under-utilized and in disrepair. "I never in a thousand years thought I'd do this," said Toody, "start with Elm Playlot. But it has such great potential, lovely trees and it was just blocks from an elementary school. Look what could be done."

So Toody Maher started knocking on doors. She felt she had to start with the neighbors. They were the experts on the neighborhood, its condition and its needs. They had lived there longer and knew the human resources, as well. People were skeptical at first. But respectful of hard work and good ideas. A partnership was formed, as Toody built an advisory group for the park. She sought out those who had worked on other parks and those with experience in children's play issues. Her advisory team cautioned her that changes in the parks must address the problems of people in the neighborhood.

Next she went seeking financial support. She took her plan to the Richmond Redevelopment Agency. They were impressed, providing her with seed money. If she could raise \$30,000 in a week or so, they would match that amount to begin the planning process. Fortune's Entrepreneur of the Year exceeded that, secured the match and moved on to win a series of small grants from Kaiser Foundation Health Care, Chevron and private foundations.

Witnessing her success, the Redevelopment Agency offered the newly christened Pogo Parks \$400,000. But just as Toody began leveraging Redevelopment Agency funds to pay for landscape architects, construction and equipment, the fiscally strapped State of California wiped out the State Redevelopment Agency.

Undaunted, Toody started over. Back to the foundations and public agencies. California had passed Proposition 84, \$384 million in bond monies for new parks for the critically underserved. From this she won a grant of \$2 million to redevelop the Elm Playlot. Pogo Parks had achieved lift off!

Now Pogo Parks consists of the Elm Playlot, Harbor-8 Park and the Greenway . . . all in different stages of development and need. The Elm Playlot is a half acre bustle of activity. Workers are constructing the trike path, play structures, disc swings, a ball wall, picnic and BBQ grills and a multi-use area for performances or tai chi. There will be a zip line, only the second in such a park, and lights in all the trees. The park's community garden will help supply a healthy food kitchen offering food growth and preparation classes as well as delicious meals. Last summer over 9000 meals were served at the park, the area's #1 food distribution point. The Playlot playworkers, recruited as much as possible from the neighborhood, are trained to create high quality play opportunities that spark a child's individual development.

Nearby, a partnership of the Trust for Public Land, City of Richmond and community groups combined to produce the Richmond Greenway, an abandoned right of way, converted to gardens and recreation which winds through two blocks linking residents to community services and leading them to the next phase . . . the Harbour-8 Park, a new children's play area surrounded by green gardens, comfortable seating and public art. As the Elm Playlot nears completion, this next phase of Pogo Parks takes shape. . . more sparks, rising from the ashes!