

## California Group Remaking Tough City, One Park at a Time

by JAMES RAINEY

RICHMOND, Calif. — A decade ago, not much playing went on at the Elm Play Lot, unless you counted the pitbulls ripping at the raggedy children's swings, or the unemployed men tossing wine bottles on the barren asphalt.

The playground was broken, like too many things in the Iron Triangle, one of the poorest neighborhoods in the heart of one of the poorest cities in the San Francisco Bay Area. About a third of the residents lived below the poverty line and the city's murder rate topped the region — two times higher than in Oakland.

Ten years later, a park that epitomized urban despair is unrecognizable. Grass has sprouted, along with a garden, play structures, barbecues, a zip-line and even a small creek. Children dip their toes in the burbling water, if they aren't too distracted by classes in art, chess, gardening and much more.

These programs, driven by a non-profit called Pogo Park, could be a model for urban innovation, experts say. They let residents, rather than bureaucrats, decide what they need. Kids who once feared leaving their homes said the park has created an oasis for fun and friendship, where they can play and put aside the cares of a sometimes troubling world.



Marie Kamali, center left, a community art instructor leads an art class for kids in Pogo Park in Richmond, Calif., Monday Nov. 6, 2017. Andrew Burton for NBC News

"They have activities all the time, a Halloween party and games," said Markel Anderson, 17, who began coming to the park when he was 12. He said adult volunteers lent him a kind ear when he was having problems and he now works a few hours a week with younger kids. "Knowing I can be a role model," Anderson said, "it makes me feel warm."

The Christian Science Monitor this year dubbed the transformed Elm Play Lot “one of America’s most innovative public places.” An Australian scholar who promotes urban development and social responsibility for the United Nations called it “one of the most incredible examples of social entrepreneurship I have ever seen.” And an acclaimed Berkeley urban planner cited Pogo Park as “maybe the best example of true community ownership and hands-on engagement” that he has encountered.

The metamorphosis in Richmond already includes a second community green space, Harbour-8 Park. Plans have been laid to connect the two parks with an urban safe zone, dubbed the “Yellow Brick Road.” And, as of last week, Pogo Park announced it would create a start-up business out of making good parks.

Workers who have remade the two Richmond locales now will build playground equipment for other parks and private clients under the banner Pogo Park Products. The effort will be jump-started by a \$1 million grant from Chevron. (The petroleum giant has brought jobs, along with toxic air pollution, to Richmond for more than a century. Its refinery is the city's largest employer.)

The startup will train and employ community residents at three craft shops in the city, constructing the kind of quirky, hand-made play structures, benches, fences and barbecues that have become signatures of the two Richmond parks. The jobs and skills training will be welcome, as will proceeds from the venture, which will be folded back into more parks programs.

The Chevron grant will add to millions of other dollars that the non-profit has attracted to rebuild the two parks and begin planning the new yellow pathway that will connect the parks with schools, churches, community centers and other havens.

The government and foundations have been less interested in paying the ongoing costs of classes and other programs — ranging from free haircuts, to afternoon Zumba sessions to a petting zoo — that have changed the Richmond parks from dead zones into ebullient gathering spots.



Source: Google Earth



Richmond, California. NBC News

"The construction provided the bones, but the programs are the spirit and life of the thing," said Toody Maher, the founder and executive director of Pogo Parks.

Maher hopes that Pogo Products, and other entrepreneurial programs to come, will one day provide as much as one-third of the non-profit's budget. "We don't just want to put our hand out," Maher says. "We want to earn our own."

Maher, 57, was raised in the Los Angeles suburbs. As a tomboy who spoke with a severe stutter, she knew from a young age what it felt like to be ostracized. She found her place, in part, in a park, where she was the only girl on her Little League team.

After attending the University of California, Berkeley, where she starred on the volleyball team, she built a few small businesses, then switched to the non-profit sector. Moving to Richmond, she immediately spotted a disconnect: The city's parks were largely empty, while children — living with the stress of poverty and crime — clearly needed an outlet.

In a neighborhood that is nearly 90 percent black and Latino, Maher stands out. She is white and 6 feet tall and given to wearing a broad-brim straw hat atop hair in pig-tails, jeans and a tie-died shirt: an Amish hippie, come to the 'hood. And Richmond hasn't had the best experiences with other newcomers with big ideas.

Thirty years earlier, dozens of locals had been shepherded away from the city by a smooth-talking evangelist, the Rev. Jim Jones. But rather than a utopia on earth, Jones brought the Bay Area's dispossessed to a woebegone jungle encampment that became known as Jonestown, Guyana, where hundreds would die in a mass murder-suicide. In her early years, some people were not shy about asking Maher, "Are you another Jim Jones?"

But this newcomer seemed remarkably unfocused on herself. And she persisted.

"Regardless of race, creed, color, sexual orientation or whatever, Toody is real with everyone," said N. Bruce Williams, an administrator at a foster care agency, who helps Pogo Park with personnel issues. "It's not about ego. This is where she has found her place. This is her calling."

Maher insists she is only a connection with "the man," meaning money and influential outside interests. She pushes others on the Pogo Park team into leadership roles, like Carmen Lee, the Elm Play Lot's constant overseer, described by the children as a second mom; Doris "Mother" Mason, a public housing worker and respected elder, who helped lure other volunteers; James Anderson, a former cocaine peddler who now works full time maintaining Pogo's two parks.



Farida (who requested to not disclose her last name) plays with her son Mouhamed, age six, in Pogo Park in Richmond, Calif, Monday Nov.6, 2017. Andrew Burton for NBC News

Impressed by the results and the park's ever-more-ambitious goals, Pogo has lured accomplished outsiders like home builder Tom Lawrence, master metal worker Tom Reicher and Ron Holthuysen, the founder of Scientific Art Studio, who helped build the park's unique hive-like climbing structures and trash-can barbecues.

Scientific Arts, acclaimed for public structures like AT&T Park's giant baseball mitt, now employs Pogo Park activists as apprentices, to learn welding, woodworking and fabrication skills.

"If you get one person over that hump it's great," said Holthuysen, an immigrant from Holland. "But this is going to spread to many more...and a whole community will be changed."

Now, the Pogo Park team is looking to the next horizon — a time when its improvements and the Bay Area's real estate boom may bring higher rents and increased gentrification to Richmond. The non-profit has formed a partnership with The Conversation Fund, a national organization that previously focused on preserving forests and other open space.

The fund helped purchase property adjacent to Harbour-8 park, which one day it hopes will be home to businesses, like a café, a laundromat and an event center. And it is considering snapping up other properties in an attempt to keep current residents from being priced out.

"It's amazing the changes that have been made," said Daniel Iacofano, CEO of MIG, a Berkeley urban planning firm renowned for helping to remake downtown Denver. "But now comes the number-one challenge in urban planning: How do you revitalize a place and maintain the social and cultural roots that created it to begin with? It's an issue all over the world. It's very, very challenging. And Pogo Park is taking it on." 🌈

---