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Toody Maher (left) advises a team of paid staff rebuilding Pogo Park in Richmond, Calif. on Tuesday, May 6, 2014, in preparation for the park's grand opening in the fall. They are: Richard Muro, Daniela Guadalupe, Jose Juan Reyes, Eddie Doss, Karina Guadalupe and Tonie Lee. Photo: Paul Chinn, The Chronicle | [Buy this photo](#)

By any measure, the neighborhood had problems. When Toody Maher moved in, she already knew about Richmond and its notorious Iron Triangle or, as one law enforcement officer called it, Triage Triangle. But Maher had some ideas on improvements and the energy to make them happen.

During World War II, Richmond had briefly flourished as a shipbuilding center. But when those jobs set sail, unemployment rose, families were broken, and crime rates soared to among the highest in the nation. Thus, the view from outside Richmond is often clouded by these grim social conditions.

Nevertheless, Maher had been charmed by the neighborhood, with its comfortable homes, broad avenues, plentiful parks and affordability. Where others saw mayhem and danger, residents saw people stronger for what they had endured.



Toody Maher is seen at Pogo Park in Richmond, Calif. on Tuesday, May 6, 2014. Maher is the driving force behind the complete renovation of the park, which is located in the heart of the Iron Triangle. Photo: Paul Chinn, The Chronicle | [Buy this photo](#)

Maher already had learned a bit herself about endurance and making things work. After graduating from UC Berkeley, she played professional volleyball in Europe, pioneered the launch of Swatch watches on the West Coast and designed [Fortune magazine's](#) 1990 Product of the Year, the world's first clear phone with lights. That same year she was named Inc Magazine's entrepreneur of the year.

She set about realizing the Richmond parks' potential by organizing the greatest assets of the community: the people around her and the land where they lived.

"Every day I'd walk through the Elm Playlot and see these great trees, but no kids. The parks were close to the elementary schools and thousands of kids' homes. It made sense for everyone to try to improve them," she said. Now, Pogo Park consists of the Elm Playlot, Harbour-8 Park and Unity Park (the latter two part of the Richmond Greenway), all in different stages of development.

What Maher and her neighbors are doing provides a model for how people anywhere can improve their communities. Her plan was simple, direct and labor intensive, starting with the hard work of building coalitions and finding ways to access resources. Everyone had a role and saw how everyone could benefit. The outcomes were tangible.

Elm Playlot today is a half acre full of energy and activity, with workers constructing tricycle paths, play structures, disc swings, a ball wall, picnic and barbecue grills and a multiuse area for performances or tai chi. Above are a zip line and lights in the trees. When completed, the park's community garden will help supply a healthy-food kitchen and classes in growing and preparing nutritious food.

Last summer, more than 9,000 meals were served at the park. Elm Playlot workers, recruited mainly from the neighborhood, are trained to create high-quality play opportunities that contribute to children's development. Nearby, Pogo Park has combined with the [Trust for Public Land](#) to help Richmond and other community agencies plan the Richmond Greenway, an abandoned right of way that will be converted to gardens and recreation.



Toody Maher, left, stands with Daniela Guadalupe, Richard Muro Salazar, Jose Juan Reyes Martinez, Eddie Doss, Karina Guadalupe and Tonie Lee in Pogo Park, Wednesday April 23, 2014, in Richmond, Calif. Maher, who made a name for herself as an entrepreneur, has worked with the community for five years to completely remake a public park into a source of community pride. Photo: Lacy Atkins, SFC | [Buy this photo](#)

The greenway winds through the city, linking residents to community services and leading to the next phase - Harbour-8 Park, a new play area surrounded by green gardens, comfortable seating and public art.

The success of Pogo Park can be measured by its physical accomplishments. But the testimony of its users and movers shows a more wide-ranging potential impact. As park user and staff member [Carmen Lee](#) says: "Our new parks have showed us how we can act to make our lives better."

Model for success

Here is the formula Toody Maher and her community used to reimagine and improve their community parks:

Define the problem: The parks, especially Elm Playlot, where she started, were underutilized and in a state of disrepair.

Assess the resources available: Neighbors had knowledge, experience and ideas. But it would take both public and private financial resources to use these assets.

Mobilize these resources: Maher began this journey by walking the neighborhood, knocking on doors, and founding a nonprofit organization - Pogo Park. She recruited an advisory board and staff. She also sought out experts in the field, those who had worked on other parks or with experience in children's play and development.

Secure financing: Maher took her plan to [the Richmond Redevelopment Agency](#). If she could raise \$30,000 in a week or so, they would match that amount to begin the planning process. Inc Magazine'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](#), Children's Hospital Oakland and other private foundations.

Be strong and resilient in the face of adversity: The Richmond Redevelopment Agency had pledged \$400,000 to help pay for landscape architects, construction and equipment. But the financially strapped state of California wiped out the city's redevelopment agency. Undaunted, Maher went back to the private foundations and public agencies and helped the city of Richmond win \$2 million in Proposition 84 bond funds to rebuild parks for the critically underserved.

Build (and maintain!) it and they will come: Using local help and expertise as much as possible, implement your ideas.

- [Michael Berkowitz](#)

Michael Berkowitz is a past senior manager of the [San Francisco Planning Department](#) and a former planning commissioner for the city of Berkeley. To comment, please submit your letter to the editor at www.sfgate.com/submissions/#1



Tonie Lee, paid staff of Pogo Park's resident team, sands a wooden fence featuring shapes of neighborhood children at Elm Play Lot in Richmond, Calif. on Tuesday, May 6, 2014, in preparation for the park's grand opening in the fall. Photo: Paul Chinn, The Chronicle | [Buy this photo](#)



Jose Juan Reyes Martinez, left and Richard Muro Salazar work on the sand box that will be at Pogo Park, Wednesday April 23, 2014, in Richmond, Calif. Toody Maher, who made a name for herself as an entrepreneur, has worked with the community for five years to completely remake a dangerous and distressed public park into a source of community pride. Photo: Lacy Atkins, SFC | [Buy this photo](#)



Jose Juan Reyes uses a sander to smooth a fence bearing the name of Pogo Park in Richmond, Calif. on Tuesday, May 6, 2014, in preparation for the park's grand opening in the fall. Photo: Paul Chinn, The Chronicle | [Buy this photo](#)



Play structures are in place at Pogo Park in Richmond, Calif. on Tuesday, May 6, 2014, in preparation for the park's grand opening in the fall. Photo: Paul Chinn, The Chronicle | [Buy this photo](#)