

# 'Disneyland' of the Iron Triangle

By Sharon K. Sobotta

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WINTER WONDERLAND Alex Gaines Distributes Skates To A First-Time Skater In Richmond's Pogo Park. (Photo By Sharon K. Sobotta)

Frederick Law Olmsted once said that parks had the potential to serve as the lungs of a city. If he were alive today and could see the magic that unfolds at Pogo Park, he'd likely note that it's the heart and pulse of Richmond's Iron Triangle.

Forty-two-year-old Robin Doss has lived in Richmond for all of her life, but Pogo Park's been a game changer for her since she discovered it a few years ago. On the kick-off of winter, during the park's first-ever Winter Wonderland, Doss smiled from her wheelchair as she watched community members ice skate for the first time and children bounce in a gigantic snowman-shaped bouncy house or ride around the park in a train, as holiday tunes blared in Spanish.

"It makes me feel good to see children feeling happy and enjoying themselves," Doss said.

Pogo Park's inaugural Winter Wonderland removed the barriers of distance and cost that so often prevent people from experiencing winter fun like ice skating, which can cost \$18-\$20 per person and requires people to travel outside the community, which isn't possible for many families. It also made everything from hot cocoa and electronic reindeer rides to ziplining, bouncing and skating free and centrally accessible to everyone.

Although Doss, who is wheelchair-bound, mostly observed the festivities, she makes her way to the park several times a week to participate in other activities. She attends free art classes Monday through Friday and usually spends extra time with bunnies, horses and animals that visit the park on Fridays.

“I love art and community,” Doss said. “I love the animals, and they love me. Parks like this one keep us busy and safe. I hope one day we can add a Boys & Girls Club here for the youngsters.”

Amilcar Gonzalez—in the park with his 13-year-old, 4-year-old and 2-year-old children—seemed as delighted by the experience as his youngsters.

“I’ve been a resident of Richmond for over 15 years,” Gonzalez said. “My kids go to school here. They have friends and family here. Parks like this one bring parents, kids and the community itself together.

“We don’t get this [winter fun] here in Richmond unless we leave and go out of our own community,” he continued. “It’s hard for people to travel. A lot of people don’t have the funds to travel outside of the city. It’s really beautiful to have it all here and to have a safe space for us to all come together and enjoy it.”

Miguel Chavez did his best to stay on his feet as he attempted to ice skate for the first time, alongside his seven-year-old daughter, Hayley, and his 13-year-old son, Miguel Jr.

“I’m trying,” Chavez said while scurrying to keep his balance on the makeshift ice rink. “It’s really hard, but I’ll keep practicing.”

“I’m doing better than my dad,” Chavez’s seven-year-old daughter, Hayley, teased.

“It’s lots of fun, and I definitely want to try again sometime,” Miguel Jr. said. “It’s nice to have things like this for our community.”

These are exactly the kinds of stories Toody Maher, the executive director and founder of Pogo Park, longed to hear when she set out to change the narrative of the neighborhood and the city that was once considered the seventh most violent community in the country.

“We worked with residents to reclaim this once abandoned, broken park,” Maher said.

“To be safe, moms used to take their kids to the other side of the street when they walked by. It used to be filled with men who sat drinking, fighting and playing dice, but it wasn’t a place for children or families. Now this is almost like the ‘Disneyland’ of the Iron Triangle. It’s a place for magic and enchantment. Play is the pathway to joy.”

Maher believes the park has what it needs to be a long-term fixture for the community—an infrastructure powered by paid staff with benefits.

“When we built the park, we hired a paid staff of 14 residents who really have Ph.D.s from their own neighborhood,” she said. “We needed to figure out why the park didn’t work before and what it would take to bring it to life. With our dedicated staff of residents, it is working.”

Even though the Winter Wonderland experience lasted just two days, Maher said that magic happens in the park every day of the year. She noted the transformative impact of the park: As families gravitate towards and not away from the park, the public safety in the surrounding community has reportedly increased as folks look out for each other and homes are no longer boarded up. An academic partnership study is being conducted to gauge the park’s effects on the neighborhood.

“We’ve been working with UC Berkeley to measure Pogo Park’s impact on community health and wellbeing,” Maher said. “One of the biggest data points that shot through the roof was public safety. Everybody watches out for each other. Neighbors know neighbors.”

Referencing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Maher said, “It’s the U.N. right of a child to play, and in this neighborhood where so many kids were trapped inside their homes, parks are especially important.”

When Manjit Sappal, a former member of the Richmond Police Department, migrated to Richmond from India with his family when he was just eight years old, he didn’t have places like Pogo Park to play, and his parents didn’t have the resources to connect him with activities in the community. He considers it luck that he found his footing in Richmond during his coming-of-age years before going on to be a police officer.

“Richmond is a place where many people struggle with poverty, and when people become teenagers or reach the age of 20, they feel good that they made it through their youth,” Sappal said. “I remember responding to a shooting and talking with three kids between the ages of 7 and 9 who witnessed the whole thing.”

He added, “The kids could describe with clarity the kind of gun the perpetrator had, they remembered his shoes and the model and make of his car. When I asked for their addresses or phone numbers, they didn’t have those answers. That stuck with me. Children really do learn what they live.”

This is precisely why Maher and the village of donors, staff and community members powering Richmond’s Pogo Park believe so strongly in the potential of parks, and why they’re building and renovating others.

“I think parks like this are the antidote to things that ail the community,” Maher said. “In our own little way, we’re a nuclear bomb of positivity as we build from the inside out with people who live here who know what their neighborhoods need.”

Pogo Park is part of a nonprofit and operates with the help of grants, foundations, donations and contracts for other park projects. The staff offers two-hour tours every Friday to potential donors; the park is free and open to all every day, year-round. For more information, visit [pogopark.org](https://pogopark.org).