

San Francisco Beautiful's 2005 Beautification Awards Presentation

by Dee Dee Workman

Good evening.

After one of the worst natural disasters this country has ever seen, survivors are returning to the south to begin rebuilding their lives. In the face of such devastation, with the cost of gasoline in the stratosphere and oil prices rising as winter approaches, protecting and conserving our natural resources has inevitably moved to the front of our collective consciousness. No longer a matter of debate, the search for sensible solutions to protect our ecological well-being is, it seems, underway.

Here in San Francisco we are repeatedly faced with the need to find methods to repair and improve the quality of our urban environment, often in the throes of severe budget shortages. Yet, time and again, local heroes in private and public life step forward to offer innovative solutions, and considerable sweat equity, to rebuild the City's infrastructure in environmentally sound and sustainable ways.

From the Inner Mission to the Outer Sunset, from the OMI to Chinatown, individual citizens and community organizations, working hand in hand with resourceful city staff, are making the most of our unique natural and historic resources while shaping San Francisco into a healthier and more beautiful place to live. We honor these civic champions tonight with the San Francisco Beautiful 2005 Beautification Awards.



Linda Blacketer and Dad Dodt

At the turn of the century the southern bayshore of San Francisco was a diverse community of immigrants. French laundries and tanneries shared Railroad Avenue, now 3rd Street, with Italian bakers and butchers. Germans worked the shipyards; a Chinese shrimping community thrived near Hunter's Point. The neighborhood became home to thousands of African Americans who left the south for jobs in the naval shipyard during World War II.

Throughout Bayview history, a formidable Victorian has stood majestically in the center of the neighborhood. Constructed in 1865 by post-Gold Rush builder Stephen Piper for Daniel Sylvester and his family, Sylvester House served as a farmhouse for a cattle ranch which included out-buildings that still exist in the neighborhood. The Sylvester family sold the house in 1913 to a Genoese boat builder, Constantino Faggione. His sons Silvio and Augusto, architectural painters who decorated the Castro Theater, added gorgeous interior details to the house. But as the neighborhood's economy declined, this magnificent community centerpiece became the victim of neglect and decay as the third owner,

who bought the house in 1963, let it fall to disrepair.

In 1978 Linda Blacketer was searching for an old Victorian to fix up. She came across this dilapidated heap and fell in love with it. But her loan was denied because the house was in a red-lined area. Linda, a public health nurse for nearly 30 years, had no qualms about the neighborhood and fought to own her home here. She won the battle and the Sylvester House, such as it was, became her own.

Linda spent the next 25 years painstakingly returning this pile of rubble to its original splendor. Delicate Italianate design details were lovingly restored. Sustainable energy systems were also added: solar panels have reduced the electric bills in the three-story house to only \$4 a month. Now San Francisco City Landmark #61, Linda has deeded the facade of Sylvester House to Heritage as a conservation easement so that no one in the future will be able to alter it.

Linda and her husband Dan Dodt leave their front door wide-open most of the year. Linda says she feels safer living in the Bayview than she ever did in Noe Valley. Linda and Dan regularly host community meetings, block parties and political gatherings, devoting their time to preserving and protecting the neighborhood they love. The goal, they both say, is to find ways to improve it without gentrification and the displacement that goes with it.

Dan is Vice Chair of the Bayview Hunter's Point Project Area Committee, a group of residents trying to eliminate blight in the Bayview by advising the Redevelopment Agency on local projects. Dan also started the Bayview Business Resource Center to revitalize 3rd Street's troubled commercial corridor.

The Bayview Historical Society, recently launched by Dan and Linda, is dedicated to the study and protection of historically and architecturally significant sites in the district. Their fascinating website, www.bayviewhistory.org, explores the rich legacy of the area from Islais Creek to Butchertown, from the Bayview Opera House to hip hop culture.

Dan and Linda say their neighborhood needs what most others already have: decent places to shop, fresh produce and meat markets, home-grown businesses that support the local economy. In a neighborhood where, it might surprise you to learn, 65% of residents own their own home, Bayview Hunter's Point is full of established families who have lived there for generations. The challenge, says Dan, is to keep it that way. Tonight, on the 140th anniversary of the building of Sylvester House, please join me in honoring Linda Blacketer and Dan Dodt with San Francisco Beautiful's Robert C. Friese Award for Neighborhood Conservation.



Kid Power Park

What does it take to build a better neighborhood?

Middle school students at St. John's Educational Thresholds Center, a youth development agency, surveyed their North Mission neighborhood in the summer of 1995 to find the answer to that question. They made some interesting discoveries: the district had more than its share of liquor stores and thrift shops. But in a community bursting with children, many from low-income and immigrant families, there were no parks or playgrounds near by. So, this handful of resourceful 15 year olds did what any of us would do in that situation: they built a park.

Ethel Siegel Newlin from St. John's guided her students in what started as a summer project and ended nine years later as an urban planning success story.

With guidance from Jim Chappell of SPUR, Ethel and her students figured out what needed to be done to put a park in their neighborhood. They testified before the city's open space committee for three years before finally securing the funds to get the project started. Carol Migden, an assemblywoman at the time, then got one and half million dollars in state funds to build it.

With money in hand, the students searched for a location for their new park. They suggested several lots but were told the locations were too dangerous. Ironic, since these were the same streets where the children lived, and played in, every day.

A vacant lot on Hoff Street behind the 16th Street BART station was finally identified. Smelly, humming with drug transactions and littered with garbage - it was perfect! The property owner was willing to sell and everything was going along nicely until a developer came along and made a better offer. So what did the students do? They plead their case, writing letters asking the developer to change his mind. And can you imagine? In the middle of the dot-com feeding frenzy, with real estate prices in the Mission going through the roof, the developer, who had grown up in the neighborhood as a child of immigrants, withdrew his bid.

The students who started this project grew too old to use the park they helped create, so a new generation stepped in to move their vision to completion. On September 18, 2004, nearly a decade after the effort had begun, Kid Power Park opened to the public. City architects from the Recreation and Park Dpt. and the DPW worked with the neighbors to design a sunny and cheerful public park and plaza that would accommodate people of all ages. Two colorful play areas were built for the children. Older folks wanted a place where they could sit in the sun and watch the world go by so there are benches and tables for them. A community garden was installed because people wanted a place to grow food. A dazzling fountain provides cool water on hot Mission District days. Low maintenance plants that blossom all year long add color and enliven the space. Artist Amy Blackstone designed the striking wrought-iron fence.

The name of the park was chosen in a contest. It conveys a strong message that children have the power to bring positive change to their communities. St. John's and its students took that to heart and gave us all the gift of Kid Power Park.



The Chinese Historical Society of America Museum and Learning Center

The next time you visit Chinatown, go to Clay Street between Powell and Stockton. One of San Francisco's cultural treasures is housed in an architectural masterpiece there. I bet you've passed it a million times. The Chinese Historical Society of America Museum and Learning Center resides proudly in the former Chinatown YWCA, a Julia Morgan classic.

The first large wave of Chinese immigration to North America occurred during the 19th century. By 1882, 75% of the agricultural workforce in California was Chinese – but that year also marked the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act, which prohibited Chinese laborers from naturalization and immigration.

In the 1920's the law was repealed but segregation remained a way of life. By then thousands of Chinese immigrants had settled in San Francisco's Chinatown, the oldest established Chinese community in the country. When the YWCA decided to put a building nearby that would have excluded that community, the women of Chinatown demanded one of their own.

They wouldn't take no for an answer. When the Y agreed to build a building but refused to pay for it, Emily Fong led this group of Chinatown women up and down California to raise the funds. Driving their own cars, which was unusual for women at the time, and in the heart of the depression, they raised \$25,000 from Chinese coastal communities to build Chinatown's own YWCA.

The building was completed in 1932. Renowned architect Julia Morgan blended Chinese cultural motifs with Western Arts and Crafts design to produce a building that truly stands the test of time. Ceramic roof tiles from China, a circular cast stone window and three Chinese towers adorn the brick exterior. A traditional Chinese courtyard flanked by a glass-walled corridor brings serenity and light inside.

The Chinatown YWCA held special significance among Chinese American women. It provided a means for them to meet, to acquire professional skills and to interact with people outside the Chinese community.

But the Loma Prieta earthquake changed that. Damaged and in need of an extensive retrofit, the Y decided to sell the building. The Chinese Historical Society of America stepped forward to take on the challenge. Established in 1963 to foster an understanding of the Chinese experience in America, the society had acquired one of the country's largest collections of artifacts tracing the history and cultural legacy of the Chinese in the United States. For 30 years it exhibited its collection in temporary spaces around Chinatown.

The Society raised nearly 2 million dollars, and in November 2001, opened its Museum and Learning

Center in the newly renovated Chinatown YWCA.

The Y's 2000 sq/ft gym has been converted to the main exhibition hall. New track lighting maintains uninterrupted viewing of the original wood ceiling, an innovative structural system that shows off Julia Morgan's talents as an engineer.

Fascinating displays tell the story of thousands of years of Chinese American history, starting with crossing the Pacific, then leading us through Chinese contributions to the railroad, fishing and agricultural industries, through the era of exclusionary laws and rampant sinophobia, to modern social and political life. The gymnasium stage and smaller adjacent rooms now contain climate-controlled galleries with rotating exhibits. Community meetings and lectures are held on the lower floor. An elevator and wheel chair lift have been added to make the building accessible to everyone.

The YWCA was carefully renovated to enhance and protect its intricate architectural details, so that the fabric of the building's original design remains intact. Tonight we honor The Chinese Historical Society of America and its Museum and Learning Center for preserving our city's unique cultural and architectural history.



Stern Grove

There is nothing like spending an afternoon picnicking in the grass under towering redwood and eucalyptus trees, enjoying the music of Los Lobos or Miriam Makeba or the San Francisco Symphony, in the cool fog of a San Francisco summer day.

More than 6 million visitors have experienced the delights of world class performances in the Rhoda Goldman Meadow since Rosalie Meyer Stern gave Stern Grove to the people of San Francisco in 1931. The land was deeded to the city under one condition: that visitors would always be able to enjoy live cultural performances there, for free.

For nearly 7 decades Stern Grove Festival has drawn more than 100,000 people every summer to this bucolic outdoor amphitheater in the southwest corner of the city. But the theater was becoming a victim of its own popularity. Degradation to the concert meadow began to jeopardize the grove. The lawn was trampled and worn. Erosion under the trees on the upper slope caused concert-goers to inadvertently slide down the slippery hillside. The rickety and uneven stage posed a danger to dancers. Dressing rooms for the performers and bathrooms for patrons were dank and cold and plagued by constant sewer back-ups.

But go there today, and you will be astonished to see that Mount Olympus has come to 19th Avenue and Sloat Blvd. Inviting grassy seating terraces evoke the elegant symmetry of an ancient greek amphitheater. Huge stone outcroppings reflect the hazy sunlight coming through the trees, casting

a golden hue across the concert grove. The lawn is green and lush. Walkways have been upgraded and are now accessible to the disabled. A grand stage framed and protected by a retreating canopy has replaced the old wooden platform and sound and lighting systems are state of the art. New dressing rooms and actual working bathrooms greet performers and patrons.

Resurfaced trails and a more formal seating pattern will help preserve the amphitheater while providing enhanced comfort and visibility for concert-goers. But best of all, the natural beauty and rustic quality of Stern Grove is still very much present.

World-renowned landscape architect and environmental planner Lawrence Halprin redesigned the amphitheater to be in harmony with its surroundings. He views the meadow as a valley in the wilderness and wanted to preserve that quality. His vision was to create a respite from the surrounding urban environment while ensuring that Stern Grove would be usable for a long, long time.

Doug Goldman is continuing his family's awesome philanthropic legacy by leading the Stern Grove Festival's 15 million dollar capital campaign for the meadow's restoration, which is being carried out by San Francisco's Recreation and Park Department. Included in the cost is an endowment that will provide for on-going maintenance of the amphitheater. Tonight we thank the Goldman family, Lawrence Halprin and the Stern Grove Festival for protecting Rosalie Stern's promise made more than 70 years ago by rescuing one of San Francisco's most prized cultural institutions for future generations.



Shotwell Greenway

Jane Martin woke up on a rainy morning last year in her house on Shotwell Street and found herself standing in 2 feet of raw sewage. Heavy rainstorms had caused our ancient, overloaded sewer system to back up into her Mission District neighborhood, causing severe flooding and water damage in many homes and businesses there.

San Francisco has a combined sewer system, meaning that rain mixes in the sewer lines with wastewater and is sent to treatment plants. In heavy storms the system can't handle the volume and overloads in places. Untreated sewage and storm water are commonly released as overflow into public waterways, including San Francisco Bay and the Pacific Ocean.

Facing a flooded house not once but twice in three months, Jane, who is a building designer and artist, went in search of a solution. She discovered that our city is covered in so much concrete and asphalt that rainwater has nowhere to go except the sewer system. If there is no exposed ground between the point where the rain falls and the catchbasin, 100% of the water will enter the sewers.

The answer, Jane discovered, is relatively simple: replace the hardscape with permeable landscapes

- soil, plants, rocks, trees – that permit the earth to breathe. Rainwater is diverted from the sewer system and absorbed by the soil where it nourishes the plants as it replenishes the underlying aquifer. This spring, in collaboration with the Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Services, the DPW and the PUC, Jane and her neighbors installed the Shotwell Street Greenway between 17th and 18th Streets. Large portions of the sidewalks were removed and permeable elements like soil and rocks were installed. Concrete driveways are being replaced with porous pavers. Residents selected a palette of drought tolerant plants including lavender, euphorbia and flax that were planted in the rainy season and require no permanent irrigation. The low-to-medium height plants provide variation in color and texture as well as habitat for insects, birds and butterflies. They were chosen to reflect the local culture and give a coordinated identity to the street.

The Shotwell Greenway has greened this gritty inner-city neighborhood while making it safer in the bargain. Bollards made from ornamental trash cans and paid for by San Francisco Beautiful were placed along the block to stop people from parking their cars on the sidewalk. Jane says that people simply won't drive their cars over the plants.

The Mission Station police were supportive of the greenway but tried to dissuade the neighbors from using rocks in the landscaping. We give it 2 weeks, they said, before all of your windows are broken. But it's been 8 months and I'm happy to report that everyone's windows are still intact.

Jane has started an organization to spread the word about the multiple benefits of permeable landscapes. PlantSF teaches ordinary citizens how to use the existing permit process to convert public rights-of-way into sustainable exposed-earth gardens. You too can put in permeable landscaping on your street - just go to www.plantsf.org - everything you need to know is there.

Jane Martin has given us a surprisingly simple environmental solution for our faltering urban infrastructure. The Shotwell Greenway is a model we expect to see replicated across the city in the years to come.



Randall Museum

High above the center of San Francisco, a graceful and lightweight aeroturbine spins silently in the wind on the crest of Corona Heights. Remarkably simple and lightweight, the sails on the 20 foot turbine are self-starting in low wind speeds. Because there are no huge spinning blades, it poses little risk to local migratory birds. Yet the turbine, created by Bill Becker, produces enough energy to run exhibits of the Josephine Randall Junior Museum, where it is located.

Inside the museum visitors will find a model of San Francisco in an interactive display which demonstrates how a community, powered by fossil fuels, can be turned into a green city powered by wind and sun. Amber lights represent electricity generated by fossil fuels; green lights represent clean

energy that visitors can bring to the city by creating sun and wind through hand cranks and bicycles. As more visitor-powered clean energy enters the model, amber lights are eventually eliminated and a green city is produced, sustained by community efforts.

The Randall Museum introduced their Endless Energy – Power for a Small Planet exhibit for World Environment Day this summer. A facility of the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department, this natural science center has been hidden away on Corona Heights for more than a half-century. It's like a cross between a natural history museum and a petting zoo. Native animals, birds and insects provide young urban children with an opportunity for hands-on learning about their natural environment.

Until 2001, the Randall was surrounded by a black asphalt driveway and parking lot. The dream of the Randall Museum Friends, who have operated the facility for over 50 years, was to fully capture the site by making the museum part of the rugged hilltop experience.

The Friends raised nearly 3 million dollars, including a grant from San Francisco Beautiful, to create a living landscape around the museum. Most of the asphalt has been torn out and replaced with native plant gardens and large swaths of green lawn. Like the Shotwell Greenway, this allows rainwater to return to the subsoil.

The beautification of the building's landscape has changed the fundamental character of the museum. It's a bigger experience for the children now – they can be turned loose, says Chris Boettcher, the Randall Museum Friends' Executive Director. The site itself has become a program element. The native plant gardens create a basis for nature study. Pollinator gardens attract bees. Hummingbirds are drawn to flowers planted just for them. They just showed up one day, Chris marvels. 8 Bufano sculptures scattered throughout the grounds are on temporary loan from the Valencia Gardens housing community.

In the back of the building, a new wheelchair-accessible deck and native plant garden have replaced another parking lot. Whimsical art sculptures look to be taking in the drop-dead views from the grassy lawn. Bees pass by on their way to their hive inside the building. Hiking trails lead visitors from the museum to the top of Corona Heights, joining the two resources in an organic way.

Solar panels have been installed on the roof of the museum. In fact, between the panels and the wind turbine, the Randall may soon be off the grid, generating enough power on its own to run the entire museum. We think that's something to celebrate. The Randall Museum is moving San Francisco's dream of a green city closer to reality.



Brooks Park

To witness how a handful of people have come together to heal a community, go to the top of the

south-western-most hill of San Francisco in the neighborhood known as the OMI (or Oceanview, Merced Heights, Ingleside district).

At Shields and Ramsell Streets you'll find Brooks Park, an eclectic hilltop common that once served as a playground for the Ohlone children whose families spent the summer on the banks of Lake Merced.

The Brooks family bought the site in 1936 and built their home here. In the 1970's they sold the property to the City for parkland. But vandals soon torched the house and Brooks Park became the center of drug activity and pit bull fights, driving the neighbors away and creating a menacing presence in this family-oriented community.

In 1986, Peter Vaernet, who works for the city's public health department, was looking for a house to buy. Intrigued by the hill he could see from 19th Avenue, he went up to take a look and was charmed by the obvious care the neighbors took of their homes. Over the protests of his real estate agent, he bought a house next to the park.

Over the next 20 years, Peter led the effort to take Brooks Park back for the community. It was too beautiful to waste, he says. The Friends of Brooks Park started by picking up broken glass on the hillside. Then they began to hold potlucks there. Jake Sigg, once the area supervisor for the Recreation and Park Dpt. and now a volunteer with the Native Plant Society, surveyed the western slope and found 34 species of thriving native plants. This led to the hill's designation as a protected native plant habitat. The neighbors then secured a grant from the city's Open Space Fund to purchase the 6 and a half-acre site and with the Recreation and Park Department, have restored it to a delightful park and community garden.

Dramatic views of the Farrallone Islands and Mt. Tamalpais greet visitors who come to take free Tai Chi lessons on Saturday mornings. Spontaneous tournaments have become a Sunday morning ritual after Peter brought in an old ping pong table.

A gorgeous native plant garden of baby blue eyes, buckwheat and California asters fills a hilly acre of the park. Quiet shaded pathways with spectacular views meander through the garden that is lovingly tended by neighbors like Dan Weaver, whom you may remember received an award from us for his work to improve Ocean Avenue.

In the hot, flat part of the park, over 70 planter boxes flourish where acres of asphalt once stood. Young children from a near-by child care center come every week to learn about gardening from Irma Marx, who has been volunteering in the park for years and is now the garden coordinator. A vast variety of vegetables reflects the rich diversity of cultures in the OMI.

Every day in his work Peter sees the ill effects of urban living on our children: obesity, attention deficit disorder, diabetes. Today, more people live in cities than in the countryside. Therefore we have to make our cities healthy and livable, he says. We need nature in our cities for our physical and mental health. It isn't complicated. It's just common sense.

By cultivating community stewardship, Peter, Dan, Irma and the Friends of Brooks Park are creating a safe and healthy and beautiful environment for the families of the OMI.



The San Francisco Zoo

Has anybody in this room not been to the San Francisco Zoo? If you haven't been for awhile, or have never been, rush right out and go. The zoo is going through a dramatic transformation vital to the conservation of animal species while tremendously satisfying from a visitor's perspective.

First of all, the inadequate entrance on Sloat Blvd. is gone. Visitors now enjoy sweeping views of the Pacific Ocean as they approach the zoo from the Great Highway. Architects Field Paoli, who also produced the zoo's master plan, have tied the new Friend and Taube Family Entry Village visually to Ocean Beach, rather than the sea of concrete on Sloat Blvd. Material used in the classic Arts and Crafts-design of the entry— wood, stone, native grasses – captures the local California coastal experience.

The best new feature - the African Savanna - has been placed in front so visitors can see animals as they walk in. In fact, the ticket booth is outside the gate but tickets aren't required until well inside, enabling people to take a look around and see some of the animals before paying.

The Zoo's education programs are housed in the Connie and Bob Lurie Education Center. This beautiful building evokes the feeling of a mountain lodge. The Bureau of Architecture's Andy Maloney, whom you may remember we honored last year for the wonderful Visitacion Valley Clubhouse, designed the center. 100% natural flooring, recycled wall tiles, and a gas burning fireplace of local Santa Barbara sandstone make the center feel warm and comfortable while incorporating sustainable features to make it last

The reconstructed western portion of the zoo represents the latest phase of the ongoing redesign and rebuilding program being carried out by the Recreation and Park Department and the San Francisco Zoological Society and funded by the 1997 zoo bond and capital campaign. Originally a menagerie of caged animals from around the world, the San Francisco zoo is recreating itself as a state of the art facility for animal conservation and education.

It doesn't get any better than the African Savanna. Privately funded by the Valentine family and spanning 3 acres, the Savanna is a re-creation of the African veldt. Giraffes, zebras and antelopes run free along side ostriches, marabou storks and guinea fowl. A watering hole provides a natural gathering place for the animals. Special features like sand pits and dust bowls keep the animals healthy and happy.

While most zoo habitats place the viewer on the outside looking in at the animals, the African Savanna does just the opposite: you walk to the center and the savanna surrounds you, providing the opportunity to observe the animals at close range without disturbing them. John Aiken, the zoo's

curator of planning and design, says that by offering demonstrations, like hand-feeding the giraffes from observation platforms, and observing what goes on behind the scenes, in the barns where animals are quartered at night, visitors become active participants in their care. Traditional zoo activities are seamlessly integrated with the conservation message that has become an integral part of the zoo experience.

Those messages are everywhere but not obtrusively so. The visitor is casually yet continually informed as to how well the animals are faring in the wild, and what we can do, and need to stop doing, to protect them. Information about ways to participate in preservation programs here and abroad is provided. Reminders to recycle pop up occasionally. It's like subliminal advertising, but in a good way.

John says that the great challenge in creating the new zoo is the hybrid of Barnum and Biology – entertaining the public while also caring for and protecting the animals. With over a million visitors a year; the zoo is in a unique position to make a significant contribution to conservation by exposing large numbers of people to experiences that inspire conservation values.

Executive Director Manuel Mollinedo is leading the zoo's renewal. He hopes to create a botanical garden at the zoo as well one day. Animals can't be separated from plants, he says. We need to preserve the entire ecosystem. Tonight we honor the San Francisco zoo, its staff and its benefactors, for making that message crystal clear and for teaching us why today's zoos are so important to the health of the planet.

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