

## A patchwork quilt of volunteers at Westside Community Center

by Maureen McGarry

If you want to know what a grassroots community center looks like, stop by the Jefferson School site on B Street in Eureka and you'll be amazed at all the energy there, and the possibilities to come. It is somewhat like the inherent beauty of a 'crazy quilt'- a patchwork sewn together with all kinds of shapes, patterns and colors that create an unpredictable and complex, yet compelling design.

Most of the work taking place in this bustling hub of west Eureka is provided by volunteers. Officially called the Westside Community Center, this former school building is being converted into a lively neighborhood gathering place where all ages in the community can participate and get involved. From classes for tiny dancers to bicycle repair to large construction projects, there is no shortage of activity and potential.



Richard Evans

On a tour of the building with Richard Evans and Heidi Benzonelli, two members of the all volunteer board of directors of the Westside Community Improvement Association, there is a story with every room that is the part of the fabric of this evolving project.

"There's a lot of community involvement preparing for contractors to come in and do the actual construction work. There is also room for job training opportunities for those who are eligible for CalWORKS. We have plenty of success stories," according to Evans.

Benzonelli likes to tell one of those success stories.

"We had a 22 year-old CalWORKS trainee who, when asked what skills he had to offer, replied 'I can mop.' He had done fast food work in the past and was a former graffiti artist. We realized he had computer skills and was very smart."

They had him go through the building and gather together every cleaning product that had been left behind from the school that was of use to the continuing upkeep of the place. Then they had him sit down and research all the materials on the internet. Within no time, he had assembled a Materials Safety Data Sheet compliance binder.

"He went from 'I can mop' to the next level of safety. He eventually built an operator's manual for the community center building," Benzonelli said proudly. "He worked with Bay West Supply (a local janitorial firm) and learned skills to become a maintenance man. He also learned plumbing skills and worked with electricians. In 6 months, he had a huge resume. He got a full time good paying job. This place was his skills laboratory."

Many neighbors volunteer on workdays that include building playgrounds, mowing and weeding, and developing and caring for raised beds for growing vegetables. Whatever skills neighbors have, there is a project for everyone. Just as young people have the opportunity to learn new skills, seniors have the opportunity to share their vast array of knowledge and experience.

“Three of our board members are over 70,” reports Evans. “Seniors have been good volunteers helping to establish our board. Meetings that take place at dinnertime is where seniors can come in because they don’t have the same family obligations.” Although Evans is retired, he says he is as busy as he’s ever been. His enthusiasm is infectious.

“Community members showing up has not been a problem,” says Evans. “There is a huge need for a Community Center. In this community, there was a vacuum when the school closed. The school was common ground for everyone.”

Benzonelli adds, “The projects are why people come here. It’s a new model.” Much like a quilt, she refers to it as “piece work.”

On Wednesday, July 23<sup>rd</sup>, there will be a planning meeting for the next phase of Jefferson Community Park. They will be discussing how to use the space that is currently a huge asphalt lot. Plans include developing bocce ball courts, regulation basketball courts, public art and adding more green space. The meeting is from 6 to 8 pm. Flyers encourage community members to bring their ideas with the challenge, “It’s your park, so own the process.”

To become a part of the creative quilt that is binding together this community, call 497-6280 or email [thejeffersoncenterandpark@gmail.com](mailto:thejeffersoncenterandpark@gmail.com). More information about the Jefferson Project can be found at <http://jefferson-project.org/> or <https://www.facebook.com/Jefferson.Project>

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