

Parks and Youth Development

Understanding the Role of Public
Parks and Recreation





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Understanding the Role of Public Parks and Recreation

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Mission

Since the early 20th century, public parks and recreation has been credited with contributing positively to children's lives. But the opportunity for transformation and youth development extends far beyond the provision of playgrounds and facilities for physical activity. This publication explores a variety of public park and recreation programs, many offered by way of cooperation with nonprofit, public and private partners, which encourage the development of young people into productive adults.

For more information

NRPA produced this publication in cooperation with Leesburg, Va.-based Point to Point Communications, a firm specializing in communication services for conservation and outdoors-related organizations. For more information on the involvement of public parks and recreation departments in youth development, please e-mail cybrary@nrpa.org.

Foreword

In 1994, the National Recreation and Park Association published a seminal work titled *Beyond Fun and Games: Emerging Roles of Public Recreation*. Within this book appear 19 case studies, examples of public park and recreation initiatives from across the country that are representative of the broad range of programs, services and resources that bring a new dimension to the perception of parks and recreation as an essential human service.

The basic premise of that pioneering tome is this: From California to Maine, our nation's public park and recreation departments are moving beyond simply providing places to play, and are aligning themselves as effective community solutions-providers capable of confronting problems such as teen delinquency and violence, nutritional services for the elderly, and disease prevention and health promotion. With this book comes a simple declaration: We're still in the business of building and maintaining parks and facilities that promote physical activity, but we're not limiting ourselves to it.

Across the past decade, NRPA has published several books advancing the important societal contributions made by innovative park and recreation programs, including most notably two works by Drs. Peter A. Witt and John L. Crompton: *Public Recreation in High Risk Environments: Programs That Work and Best Practices in Youth Development in Public Park and Recreation Settings*. In these editions, the two Texas A&M University professors examine a multitude of situations in which local park and recreation departments have positioned themselves as key players in guiding positive youth development—from Austin's wildly successful Totally Cool, Totally Art program to Portland, Oregon's cooperative SUN Community Schools initiative.

Contained within the product before you, you'll find brief, accessible summaries of several of the case studies that Witt and Crompton researched for their 2002 *Best Practices in Youth Development* book, as well as examinations of KidsGrow, a Baltimore-based environmental stewardship program, and the Prospect Park Youth Alliance, which uses Brooklyn's signature park to help young people develop as leaders in their communities.

For those readers who would like to delve deeper, the original 2002 Witt-Crompton publication is available from the NRPA online bookstore at www.nrpa.org/store.



John Thorne, CAE
Executive Director
National Recreation and Park Association

Brooklyn's Jewel Is Polished by Youth Council



In 2004, the Woodlands Youth Crew planted more than 2,000 trees in Prospect Park's woodland area, Brooklyn's last forest.

Flying over Brooklyn, N.Y., you pass over the grays and browns of rowhouses and apartment buildings. Suddenly, below you, a large green area appears. As if someone had dropped a huge can of paint making a 526-acre splash of emerald green, the oasis rising amid the urban setting is Prospect Park. Once known as an unsafe center of crime and drugs, the park today has been restored and rejuvenated. Its remarkable renaissance is due largely to a hard-working group of citizens that is determined to bring the park back to its former glory. Among those citizens is a youth group whose enthusiasm and successes rival any found across America.

To understand how far the park has come and the contributions the Prospect Park Youth Council has made to its rebirth, it is important to examine the park's rich history.

In 1866, after designing New York City's Central Park, landscape architects Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux began work on a new park in the middle of New York's growing immigrant center. The two men were inspired by their belief that an urban park should be a place where people could go to get away from the hurried pace of city life. Their intent was to create a retreat that belonged to people of every social class—especially to Brooklyn's poor, who couldn't afford to vacation outside of their own neighborhoods.

Olmsted and Vaux designed a vast and beautiful park. Like the grand parks of Europe, Prospect Park had lakes, green meadows, sculptures, scenic lookouts, waterfalls and a forest of exotic and common trees that formed a buffer to the urban setting surrounding it. When it was finished, in 1868, it would be called "Brooklyn's Jewel."

But 100 years later, the park seemed to reflect America's turbulent mood. By the 1960s and '70s, the number of visitors to Prospect Park had sunk to the lowest in its history, and the park had become an unsavory place with a reputation for crime and drugs. In an ironic symbol of the park's decline, the once-glowing bronze sculpture of Lady Columbia at Grand Army Plaza toppled from her chariot.

Help on the Way

In the late 1980s, a concerned group of local citizens formed the Prospect Park Alliance. The group conducted a study revealing that one-third of the park was used by teenagers, and in 1998 the Prospect Park Youth Council was launched. Now with more than 100 members, this group of young people has taken a lead role in the revitalization of the park. In a way it seems the park itself now plays a role in the transformation of many of Brooklyn's teens.

The Prospect Park Youth Council is made up of young people ages 14 to 21 from more than 30 Brooklyn schools and other local youth programs. The successful program also has drawn youth workers from as far away as London. Orvil Minott, the enthusiastic youth program manager for the Prospect Park Alliance, hails from a tiny village in Jamaica. Working with youth since the age of 19, Minott has been with the Prospect Park Alliance for more than four years. He describes the council as "a youth leadership empowerment program." Although they are united in a common cause to work together on the council, young people have the opportunity to deal with issues in their communities by acting as liaisons for their own neighborhoods.



Annually during Earth Day, council members plant a community garden, inviting school children and other groups to celebrate.

“It’s a beautiful network,” says Minott. “We talk about the issues they face and how we can share resources. We’re trying to create productive young people.”

New members participate in a 12-week training course, during which they join in fun and innovative youth development activities. In addition to practical matters such as CPR, they learn intangible skills: making their voices heard, speaking in public with confidence, being better listeners, and organizing other youth groups. Also included is a weekend retreat, graduation celebration, a trip to Albany to visit the state legislature and other special events.

By learning leadership and teamwork skills, teens are given responsibilities they may never have had to take on before. “The kids are not in this by themselves,” says Minott. “No one person is burdened, and the kids are there to support each other. Ours is a holistic viewpoint.”

The program is based on the Service Opportunity Support, or SOS, model, whereby service providers give teens the opportunity and support they need to succeed.

“We provide opportunity for the patrons and the kids, and we, the staff, help them reach their potential,” says Minott. “There are no negatives here. If someone is failing at school, the others help that individual bring his or her grades up.” According to Minott, the model inspires team spirit. “If one fails, we all fail. If one succeeds, we all succeed. It’s like developing an informal family.”

The Strength of Many

An example of this supportive networking took place recently when a young man walking in the park spied some members of the Prospect Park Youth Council working outside. He came back out of curiosity and ended up giving the kids a hand cleaning the park. The young man had previously been in trouble with the police, had dropped out of school and didn’t have a GED. He asked about the youth council, and ended up joining. With the support of the council members, he went back to school, earned his GED and entered a training program. He is now employed as a security guard at Prospect Park’s Wollman skating rink. He felt he could make a difference.

“No one is viewed negatively here,” says Minott. “It’s a positive attitude of empowerment that is key to the success of the program. The kids learn to express themselves. Criticism is constructive with feedback. It’s a very supportive environment.”

That empowerment was displayed as council members decided the park’s playground needed a renovation. They approached the Brooklyn City Council and told members not only what needed to be done, but also how it should be designed. When the funding was approved to renovate the playground, youth council members went to the playground each evening to inform the public of the playground’s closing for renovations. “They organized alternatives for the public and offered the availability of youth and children’s programs at the youth center while the construction was going on,” says Minott. “They did a great job of working with the public.”

Once a year, the teens travel to Albany to meet with elected officials to lobby for youth program funding. “This trip instills a sense that they can make a difference and be productive citizens. They learn that their voices can and will be heard,” says Minott.

Recently, youth council members went to Washington, D.C., and met with Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton to brief her on the program. In October 2004, the Brooklyn Borough president invited the teens to attend a meeting of the International Youth Council in London. Minott and three young members of the council attended the meeting and spoke of their successes. As a result of that meeting, a representative from London’s park system came to New York for a closer look. “He was totally bowled over by

how these kids worked for free," says Minott.

Home to all these activities is the Youth Resource Center, the park's youth headquarters at Bowling Green Cottage, which was an abandoned clubhouse once used for the sport of lawn bowling. The youth council took over the abandoned cottage and within three years, members had renovated the building and turned it into a safe place to gather. They moved into their new home in October 2001. Young people now drop in daily looking for employment guidance, connections to sports and other recreational events in the park, or simply to hang out with their friends.

A Place for Everyone

Under the umbrella of the youth council, teens are encouraged to get involved in ways that most appeal to them.

In 2004, the Woodlands Youth Crew planted more than 2,000 trees in a 250-acre space that represent Brooklyn's last forest. "The kids are stewards of the park and are very involved in restoration and dealing with erosion controls and replanting the forest," says Minott. "The Woodlands Youth Crew is instrumental in the health of the forest." This group of teens also works as interpreters for visitors, explaining to them what's going on in the park. During Earth Day each year, the youth council plants a community garden, and school children and other groups are invited to celebrate.

The Prospect Park Alliance helps youth find employment in the park. Community youth organizers, or CYOs, coordinate the park's youth programs with outside groups, organize community service projects and staff the Youth Resource Center. Those eligible for a CYO position are graduates of the youth council training program, and the position is designed to help council members focus on specific skills before moving on to college or a career.

Youth are also hired as park guides to educate visitors and lead camp group tours. Participants are trained in public speaking, the natural resources found in the park and the colorful history of Prospect Park, and professional naturalists mentor the youth throughout their work experience.

With the hard work of the youth council and the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, Prospect Park has once again become a place people want to go. Today, more than 6 million people visit the park each year, a measurable reward for the youth council's efforts.

Says Orvil Minott: "These young people get to see the work they've done immediately; the decisions they make have an impact. The kids in this program are devoted to community service and advocacy for public programs. They inspire me."

For more information, please visit the Prospect Park Youth Council online at www.prospectpark.org, or call 718.854.4901.

KidsGrow: Growing Tomorrow's Natural Resource Leaders



Students conduct an experiment with a scientist from the University of Maryland-Baltimore County during the school's career day event.

In the 1960s, President Kennedy made a plea to America's youth to choose lives in service to their country. Thousands responded to his call to action by entering the natural resources field. Many chose careers as wildlife biologists or environmental activists or volunteered to run neighborhood clean-up projects. Today, many of those conservationists are ready to retire, leaving a gaping hole in the workforce dedicated to preserving and protecting our environment.

But a youth recreation program in Baltimore is creating a new wave of natural resource stewards through a unique environmental education program known as KidsGrow.

KidsGrow is a year-round environmental education program that teaches urban elementary-school youth in Baltimore to appreciate the environment and become activists in their own neighborhoods.

According to Monica Logan, KidsGrow program manager: "We are creating natural resource leaders and encouraging people of color to enter those fields," an important element to include in a profession that has attracted predominantly white males in the past.

Although the program currently involves children in third, fourth and fifth grades, through the learning path Logan calls the "Green Career Ladder," the program's goal is to include middle- and high-school-age students so that they may one day choose careers in the environmental science and resource management fields. Older youth are given training and summer jobs in park forestry and maintenance at Baltimore's most visible public parks. The project provides economically disadvantaged youth with the chance to develop useful career skills that will lead to professions related to forestry.

The environmental education program, which currently enrolls approximately 60 elementary-school students, targets inner-city youth from lower-income communities and teaches them about stewardship and taking care of the earth. "Eleven years ago, when the program began, this was a very innovative project," Logan says. "It was so new, so phenomenal." Children learn through after-school classroom activities and explore Baltimore's extensive local parks and watersheds, tree nurseries, gardens and cultural assets. Students learn the importance of activism through hands-on projects such as tree plantings, greening projects, stream monitoring and neighborhood clean-ups.

Every Day Is Earth Day

Since 1994, students have planted street trees, established organic gardens, learned to fish, made maple syrup from city trees, started recycling projects and helped clean up their neighborhoods. At that time, the program was run out of several recreation centers around the city, but has since become more focused and curriculum driven. Now KidsGrow is an established part of the curriculum at Franklin Square Elementary School in Baltimore and involves four teachers there as well as staff from Parks & People, the foundation for Baltimore Recreation and Parks and the organization that launched the program. "It has a more academic focus because of our involvement in the schools," Logan says.

The curriculum for KidsGrow was designed by the Baltimore Ecosystem Study, a National Science Foundation-funded project

of the Institute of Ecosystem Studies. Each year's curriculum is unique and incorporates modules focused on a central theme that spans the entire program year.

The partnership with the school gives the program an academic focus that also includes a reading program, the "100-Book Challenge," which encourages students to read up to 100 books. Homework assistance is also given every day, since the program runs from the time school lets out at 2:30 until 6 p.m.

The Parks & People foundation is in itself unique. KidsGrow is just one of many programs run by the foundation, an organization founded by four-term Baltimore Mayor William Donald Schaefer in 1984 to address the problems of the city's aging urban recreation and parks system. The foundation was formed to raise funds and develop new programs in a way that would lessen the burdens on the Baltimore city government.

"The foundation was started because its founders wanted a think tank that would come up with innovative programs, and they also wanted the ability, as a nonprofit, to raise funds," Logan says.

The KidsGrow Environmental Education Program is sponsored in partnership with the Family League Foundation of Baltimore City, the Patrick and Aimee Butler Family Foundation, the Baltimore City Department of Recreation and Parks, and the Baltimore City Public School System.

"A lot of what I do is grant writing and fundraising," Logan says. "One major funder's grant to us requires a 90 percent attendance rate. This is challenging, but it forces you to focus on what kids want and what will keep them involved in the program."

Visiting Nature's Classroom

Much of what keeps the children coming back for more are the unique field trips that allow them to experience places outside their day-to-day, inner-city surroundings. "What I've found is it's important to give kids lots of different things to do," Logan says. "It makes it a challenge for them."

When learning about the importance of clean water, a trip to the Chesapeake Bay was organized. "We took the students sailing. It was the first time on the water for many of the kids. They were so excited," Logan says.

During the summer program, participants often go camping. Other trips include visits to the National Aquarium, zoos, nature centers and museums—places, Logan says, "our kids wouldn't be able to go to otherwise."

Foundation staff is constantly on the lookout for unique ways to incorporate environmental education into students' learning experiences. They even found a way to add an arts-enrichment element to the program. One recent project tasked the children with creating mosaic trees out of stained glass. The session was taught by a former parks and recreation department employee who now works for the state forestry department and is involved in urban art programs in Baltimore.

The KidsGrow program was recognized in 2004 for its outstanding efforts in teaching children about the environment. For the past three years, students have worked in partnership with the National Aquarium to restore Chesapeake Bay tidal wetlands. Children learned about the life cycle of plants and their importance to the estuarine ecosystem by growing wetland grasses at school in a special wetland plant nursery. The project culminated with the students planting the grasses along the Chesapeake Bay shoreline.



KidsGrow students transplant wetland grasses, grown at their school, to a Chesapeake Bay restoration site.

KidsGrow: Growing Tomorrow's Natural Resource Leaders

The project earned the students an award from Coastal America, a partnership of federal agencies, state and local governments and private organizations. President Bush signed a citation commending the students, stating, "Your contributions have enhanced coastal ecosystems and helped maintain the beauty of our country for future generations."

The children currently are working with the Baltimore City Department of Public Works and other community activists on a project that will remove several acres of asphalt from school yards and replace them with green space that can serve as outdoor classrooms. At Franklin Square Elementary School, the kids have created a serene "reading circle," where they planted trees and flowers in the back of the school. Other garden projects and tree plantings by the students have made the school a prettier place in which to learn.

Logan, who began working at Parks & People five years ago and holds a master's degree in social work, understands well the value of the KidsGrow program. "I see the impact we're having on kids," she says. "The environment they come from is challenging. Our program gives the kids a safe place to come to where they are with positive adults; something they may not have at home. These kids from 'the concrete jungles' might have never been exposed to the experiences they have through KidsGrow."

For more information, please visit KidsGrow online www.parksandpeople.org, or call 410.448.5663 ext. 110.

Totally Cool, Totally Art: Totally Successful



If the shoe fits: Hundreds of Austin teenagers have participated in Totally Cool, Totally Art.

Arriving in Austin, Texas, with a brand new degree in fine arts and art education from the University of Minnesota, Clint Hofmeister was excited to have the opportunity to put his studies to work. Through friends, he'd heard about a new program in town that was hiring artists to teach classes to teens. Now, five years later, Hofmeister oversees the Austin Parks and Recreation Department's most popular and successful program, Totally Cool, Totally Art (TCTA).

"The first class I taught was architectural sculpture," says Hofmeister. "All the projects we made were big enough to walk through. This program is great."

Now Hofmeister hires the artists, develops the class ideas, works with teens and talks to employees at park and recreation centers in the area to help them with the program.

Hundreds of Austin teenagers from high-risk environments have participated in Totally Cool, Totally Art. The program is so successful that it was chosen by the National Recreation and Park Association to be the first program branded for implementation in cities and park and recreation agencies across the country. It has won numerous awards, including the 1999 NRPA Dorothy Mullen Arts and Humanities Award and the 1998 Texas Recreation and Park Society's Arts and Humanities Award, and was the March 2000 cover story in *Parks & Recreation* magazine.

The Process of Art

Perhaps the main reason for the program's success is that it gives teens the ability to use their imagination in a way they aren't able to in school or at home. TCTA's philosophy emphasizes the process of art-making instead of the product.

Ashley Endsley, a 19-year-old alumna of the program, took her first TCTA class when she was in the 10th grade. "The classes were really different from the art classes I took at school," she says. "They weren't as strict, and the instructors let you use your imagination more. I loved it."

Endsley, now a sophomore at the University of Texas, is majoring in cultural anthropology and, she says, thanks in part to the influence of TCTA, she has chosen art as her minor. Totally Cool, Totally Art not only influenced her decision to continue pursuing art in college, but it also served her well when applying to school.

"It was a good thing to put on my high-school resume," she says. "There is a big art show at the end of the program; it's a big deal in the community, and it was great to be able to say that I had work displayed there." The semiannual TCTA Young Artists Exhibition is open to the public and draws art lovers from around the city.

Launched in October 1996, the Totally Cool, Totally Art program began as part of the Austin City Council's Social Fabric Initiative, which was designed to help the community deal with teen issues and provided funds for park and recreation programs geared to teens.

"A lot of kids, especially teens, were not being served in our community," says Robert Armistead, division manager for programs

at the Austin Parks and Recreation Department. Two city council members, Beverly Griffith and Gus Garcia, took the lead in spearheading the initiative that would provide an additional \$1.4 million in funds spread across several different programs for the first year.

“We have a community that’s very involved in city affairs, and that involvement helped to pass the initiative and push for funding of previously under-funded programs as well as new ones like Totally Cool, Totally Art,” says Armistead. The initiative is now part of the city’s parks and recreation department budget, from which TCTA is funded and maintained.



In addition to teaching the artistic process, artists also learn about working with teens from high-risk communities.

Making an Impact

According to Hofmeister, many teens involved in the TCTA program come from low-income households. Their parents work and are away from home after school lets out, or they come from single-parent families. The typical teen signing up for a class is black or Hispanic and around 14 or 15 years old, but classes are open to anyone in grades seven through 12.

In fact, the program has reached teens so successfully they often encourage their friends to sign up for classes, too. “It’s about a sense of belonging, of getting along with others, giving kids a sense of being safe,” says Hofmeister, who notes that many of the teens come back year after year.

Spencer Greenwood took his first art class through TCTA in the seventh grade when he was just 12 years old. “I took about five classes over the years,” he says. “I got a bunch of my friends to come, too.” He learned photography, painting, print making and sculpture. Now 20 years old, Greenwood fell in love with filmmaking through TCTA. “My favorite part of making films was being able to make an image of my ideas.” Through the film class, he learned how to work with a camera, create storyboards, write scripts and edit film. In the fall, he begins studying film at Columbia University in Chicago.

Like Endsley, Greenwood also enjoyed the creative freedom students are given. “Once we learned the basic techniques, we could do whatever we wanted,” he says.

Classes are free and are held twice a week. Students are initially guided by their instructors—the artist and a member of the staff of the hosting recreation center—in basic artistic techniques, but they are given the opportunity to brainstorm and come up with their own ideas

on how to implement their projects. Sometimes students plan their projects by building small-scale models using Popsicle sticks. The creative process is their own.

Hofmeister describes one of the first classes he taught, in which the teens made an upside-down room. “I was trying to teach them to create an environment,” he says. “All the furnishings were upside down. We made furniture to a lighter scale. The kids painted a canvas to look like a floor. It was really cool.”

For the Love of Art

The artists who teach the classes are encouraged to help students stretch their imaginations, but they also learn about working with teens from high-risk communities. “Artists are always looking for opportunities to work,” says Hofmeister. “The program is as beneficial for the artists who get hired as it is for the kids. They are looking for ways to get involved in the community, and this is perfect for them.”

Many of the artists, according to Hofmeister, are college students who approach their art with intense energy. But part of his job as program director is to make sure the artist-instructors know how to teach—specifically how to reach kids from high-risk environments. “I do classroom development, lots of training, and I make sure the artists can teach our kids,” he says.

Hofmeister notes that the artists love what they do. “They get paid for two hours of planning and two hours of teaching at \$9 per hour,” he says. It’s not a lot of money, but the passion for their work is apparent.

Endsley attributes much of the program’s creative energy to the youthful artists who teach the class. “I had really cool instructors. They were young, up-and-coming artists; most were in their 20s,” she says.

Aside from the teachers, another reason for the success of the Totally Cool, Totally Art program is that it gives teens the chance to work in media and materials they would never be exposed to otherwise. The range of activities is varied. In fact, keeping the programs changing is part of what makes teens come back. “We don’t want to repeat classes,” says Hofmeister. “Because so many students sign up for more than one class over the years, we don’t want to repeat what they’ve done before.”

Topics include computer arts, metalworking, toy design, mosaic, graphic art, puppetry and more depending upon the expertise of the artist-instructor. Endsley describes her experience with the many classes she took. “The first one I took was a film class; then I signed up for an architecture class, then a structure-building class, then painting . . .”

Location is also key. Run through the Austin Parks and Recreation Department, TCTA is a collaboration among the Dougherty Arts School and community recreation centers.

“We target the kids we want to reach by the location of our recreation centers, which typically are in tougher parts of town, lower-income areas,” says Hofmeister. Beginning in 1998, the collaboration between the art program and the parks and recreation department’s Roving Leader program increased the reach of TCTA and brought the program to even more teens.

While some of the older teens move on to other activities—jobs, sports, girlfriends or boyfriends—others have stayed with the TCTA program even after graduation. Spencer Greenwood recently volunteered for the program as a classroom assistant. After finishing his studies in Chicago, he says he’ll return to Austin and become a film director, noting that he plans “to be one of the best directors there is.”



Totally Cool, Totally Art allows teens to work in media and materials they would never be exposed to otherwise.

For more information, please visit [Totally Cool, Totally Art online at \[www.ci.austin.tx.us/tcta\]\(http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/tcta\), or call 512.397.1481.](http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/tcta)

P.L.A.Y. Team Plays Well in Virginia Beach



P.L.A.Y. Team has produced an ever-evolving menu of programs designed to fit the changing needs of children and young people in Virginia Beach.

Standing on the stage of the beachside amphitheater looking out over the crowd that swayed to their music that summer day in 2004, the seven brothers and sisters who make up the band *Blended* were part of something special. The group had already received national attention because of its unique story: one white family comprising a mom, dad and four kids takes in seven homeless black siblings, eventually adopting all of them and becoming a blended, very large, and very talented family. They've traveled the country, performing on *Oprah* and *Good Morning America*, and have played at the legendary Apollo Theater in New York City. But this day was different. On this day, they played to their hometown crowd in a concert that was the culmination of Virginia Beach (Va.) Parks and Recreation's Battle of the Bands.

Blended was among several bands that had just participated in one of the most successful youth programs in the country. "We entered the competition because it gave us a chance to play locally, but we also learned a lot about the music industry," says David Bollman, 19, one of the older siblings in the band.

Battle of the Bands, a 10-week arts and humanities program, is one of the many offerings of Virginia Beach Parks and Recreation's P.L.A.Y. (Promoting Leisure Activities for Youth) Team initiative. It gives young musicians the opportunity not only to perform but also to learn what it takes to enter the music field.

The program auditions young musicians, who then take one class each week covering a different aspect of the music industry. "People from the local radio stations came in to talk to the kids. [The kids] visited the amphitheater. The kids and their parents listened to lyrics of music from different times to learn how they reflected history," says Colleen Wittig, a recreation supervisor at Virginia Beach Parks and Recreation.

"We realized we were doing a lot of sports-related activities and different traditional recreation things," says Wittig, "but we didn't have a good arts program. We wanted to find a way to reach kids who were not necessarily athletic types, kids who were incredible artists and who had talents outside of sports."

Addressing a Growing Problem

Such creativity, expressed by Wittig and others involved in the city's youth program, has produced an ever-evolving menu of programs designed to fit the changing needs of children and young people in Virginia Beach. The P.L.A.Y. Team program was started in 1996 to address a problem parks and recreation employees were observing at their centers. "We were seeing children as young as 6 being dropped off in the morning and not being picked up until 10 at night. They were getting their meals from the vending machines," says Maile Hildenbrand, parks and recreation coordinator. "It was a problem we never dreamed of."

With an abundance of unstructured time and no parental supervision, children were demonstrating behavioral problems such as bullying, low self-esteem and trouble getting along with others—and leaving the parks and recreation staff to figure out how to deal with it all.

"We knew we needed to do more than just provide recreation programs," says Hildenbrand. "Counseling and intervention were

needed. We also knew many of these kids faced domestic abuse, substance abuse and other problems at home.”

So in 1996, the staff turned to the National Recreation and Park Association to see how other departments across the country were dealing with at-risk youth issues. Finding only about five other programs tailored to the needs of troubled youth, they settled on the Phoenix Parks and Recreation Department as the most comprehensive. Hildenbrand and two other staff members from Virginia Beach traveled to Arizona to learn more about the program.

“They were so innovative,” says Hildenbrand. “They addressed issues head on, from finding clothes for kids who were inappropriately dressed to launching a tattoo-removal program for former gang members. When we came back, we were very excited.”

A Program That Fits

Now the program includes, among others initiatives, a pregnancy-prevention unit called “Playing Smart” geared toward 10- and 11-year-old boys and girls; a “Safety Camp” working with the local police department to educate third-graders about kitchen, firearm and traffic safety and more; and a mobile activity center that brings activities into neighborhoods where recreation centers might not be easily accessible to youth.

“What’s really cool about the P.L.A.Y. Team is we use recreation to enhance social and life skills,” says Wittig. “There is a major recreation component to it, but we work on enhancing protective factors—those innate things inside a person that give them the resilience to deal with anything that might be going on in their life.”

One such program uses an environmental education focus to teach youth about caring for themselves. The Ripples program uses two live birds: a red-tailed hawk and a barred owl. Staff members visit existing programs and, using the birds, teach life skills to kids. “They learn how to stay safe when we talk about how the bird keeps itself safe,” says Wittig “We ask the kids, ‘What can you do to stay safe?’ We teach them personal hygiene by showing them how birds take care of themselves, and asking, ‘How do we take care of ourselves?’”

Another program, a 12-week equestrian unit, works with youth referred by juvenile court services. Kids work at a local stable taking care of horses, learning how they are shod, and how to feed and groom them. “Research says when kids are put in contact with an animal, they connect,” says Wittig. “They will learn something they may never have learned before, gain self-esteem, and take pride in setting goals and finishing tasks.”

Geared toward 12- to 14-year-olds, the girls’ basketball program, now in its seventh year, is run in partnership with Sentara Healthcare, a local nonprofit health care provider. The company provides uniforms for players and referees—and an education component. “The kicker is that before the girls can play, they take classes on personal health care and nutrition,” says Wittig.

Beyond providing coaches and a place for practice, the Virginia Beach staff has taken it a step further, creating Girls at Play, or GAP, for girls who have moved on to play at the high-school level. GAP participants mentor the younger girls and learn leadership skills.

Parents are also kept involved through fun activities, such as a night when they compete against the girls. “What’s really cool about this program is that we are starting to see some girls who have gotten scholarships to private high schools and are now going to college,” says Wittig.

Recreation specialist Craig McMillan runs another innovative program that is part of P.L.A.Y. Team. With a background in working with at-risk youth at the city’s Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse division and experience in anger management and sexual assault prevention, McMillan uses drama to help young men voice their opinions on such issues as domestic violence and attitudes toward women. The MOST (Men of Strength) program takes place at a local high school during school hours.

“We took a group of young men at the high school and got them to address sexual violence through drama,” says McMillan. “They created skits to show how they saw violence in the world and to express any injustice they may have experienced in their

P.L.A.Y. Team Plays Well in Virginia Beach

own lives. We had to build trust, but we created an atmosphere where they felt safe. The exercises helped the young men to open up.”

The Power of Partnership

Much of the success of P.L.A.Y. Team points to the outstanding cooperation between the city’s agencies. Virginia Beach Parks and Recreation is one of a number of agencies that makes up the Youth Opportunity Team. Others include health and human services and mental health agencies, the police department and the public school system.

According to McMillan, cooperation with the other agencies has allowed the parks and recreation department to “create a safety net for kids,” meaning that with the city’s youth services overlapping, staffers are able to follow up on those young people about whom they are most concerned.

McMillan came up with the Battle of the Bands concept after reading an article in the local newspaper. “The article said the kids had nowhere to perform. I said, ‘Ah-ha! There’s something we could do for the kids.’”

He worked with other agencies to find a venue, brought in specialists to teach teens about the music industry, and made sure the program included a drug-education component. McMillan, who learned about the music industry while working security for a major concert organizer in college, says, “One thing that isn’t talked about much is substance abuse, and how it relates to the entertainment industry. I wanted to teach the kids that it’s OK to emulate the talent [of a professional musician], but it’s important to look at what that individual is doing, how [he or she is] living. Your band is only as good as the musician who is the weakest link.”

“The whole concept of recreation and leisure,” says Wittig, “is about having the biggest impact on the city’s youth that we possibly can and using all of our resources to get kids’ attention. We all want our young people to become healthy members of society.”

For more information, please visit P.L.A.Y. Team online at www.vbgov.com/dept/parks/specialservices, or call 757.471.5884.

Portland's SUN Community School Program Proves Communication Is Key



The SUN program makes a school building the hub of a community and a support system for everyone in the community.

The 11-year-old boy sat under the table during the after-school program until it was time to go home. Unlike the other children in Portland (Ore.) Parks and Recreation's Schools Uniting Neighborhoods, or SUN, program, he didn't participate in any of the recreational activities; he didn't work on his homework; he didn't interact with anyone around him.

One day, one of the teens helping as a program tutor crawled under the table with him. Although the boy's English was limited, the two started to talk as best they could. Within days, the boy was happily participating in the program.

"That young lady made a difference because she took the time to communicate," says Mary Richardson, supervisor of Portland Parks and Recreation's SUN Community Schools program.

Over and over again, Richardson emphasizes the importance of communication at all levels of the program.

As a uniquely collaborative effort among her department, Portland Public Schools and the city government, the challenges of communicating were numerous, especially as the program was being launched in 2000.

"In the beginning there was some duplication of efforts," says Richardson. "I was site manager at the time, and we discovered that there were two identical programs being run at the same school at the same time. A lot of little pieces had to be coordinated. We learned that it was vital for all parties to communicate."

Addressing Community Needs

SUN Community Schools is a collaboration among Multnomah County Department of School and Community Partnerships, Portland Parks and Recreation, and the school districts of Centennial, Reynolds, Parkrose, David Douglas, Gresham-Barlow, and Portland Public Schools. Currently, there are 46 SUN Community Schools, 12 of which are operated by Portland Parks and Recreation.

The city of Portland, the largest urban area in the state, has a 25-year history of community schools. SUN Community Schools' predecessor was a program called "Time for Kids," a program that concentrated mainly on pre-teens. "It was very successful," says Richardson, "but around 1998, as the program was winding down, the city and county decided that they wanted to work together to fill the needs of the entire community."

It was then that Portland Parks and Recreation stepped forward and offered to design a program based on the Mott model. Charles Stewart Mott is credited with founding the community education movement that uses public educational facilities as year-round, community-based lifelong learning centers.

According to the National Community Education Association: "Community education, the educational philosophy that underlies community schools, advocates the creation of opportunities for community members—individuals, schools, businesses, and

public and private organizations—to become partners in addressing community needs. Community education is most easily recognized in the community school, a facility that is open beyond the traditional school day for the purpose of providing academic, recreation, health, social service, and work-preparation programs for people of all ages.”

Richardson describes community education this way: “Community education makes a school building the hub of a community and a support system for everyone in that community. A school building is a safe place to go, it’s right in the neighborhood, and it’s a place people know and trust.”

Community education had become part of school programs in other parts of the state, but tough budget decisions cut those programs, leaving Portland with the distinguished role of having the longest-running community education program in Oregon. Working together with other groups became the key to Portland’s success. “We are unique,” says Richardson, “because of the fact that Portland Public Schools [asked Portland Parks and Recreation], ‘Why don’t you take over the community education program?’”

Finding the Right Fit

But there was one piece of the puzzle that Portland Parks and Recreation wasn’t able to provide: social service. “We could plan the program, but there were still some budget issues, and, most importantly, social service wasn’t our area of expertise,” says Richardson.

That’s where Multnomah County stepped in, providing social service professionals who could help to build a program that would fit the needs of the entire community surrounding a school. They would provide poverty services, such as helping families in crisis with food and utility bills, assist those who had been evicted from their homes to find proper housing, and offer drug and alcohol counseling.

Program coordinators also wanted to add an element that would help kids achieve in schools.

“When kids are fed, they come better prepared to learn,” says Richardson. “And if there are great things to do before and after school, we know they are more likely to attend school.”

But extended day activities presented challenges for school principals, so it was decided that there would be a site manager at each school.

Selecting the Participants

The next challenge was identifying the schools located in communities with the greatest need for such a program.

The steering group put together an application process for schools to use to become SUN participants. Many of Portland’s schools have no electives—no art or music instruction—so the SUN program was attractive because it offered a way to bring those things to the schools.

“The social service piece was really needed,” says Richardson. “Principals really wanted this program at their schools because it would bring so much to their students’ families.”

The criteria for school selection considered mainly high-needs schools—those with a high free-meal count and families at poverty level—and also measured the readiness of the school facility, community support for the program, demographics and whether other programs in the community were already providing similar services.

The application process issued a request for proposals, and interviews were then conducted with principals, family members and students who met with the program coordinators from the county, Portland Parks and Recreation and school district representatives with no interest in that particular neighborhood. Fifty-four schools applied the first year. Thirteen were initially chosen, but budget cuts quickly pared that down to six. Now, three years later and with a newly approved budget increase, 46 schools function as SUN Community Schools.

Portland's SUN Community School Program Proves Communication Is Key

"The biggest challenge has been getting the resources to open doors to anyone in the community who wants to take a class," says Richardson. "In high-poverty areas, participants don't have the money to pay for classes, so grants have to help fund part of the program."

Much of what Richardson does is to bring partners together to help fill in gaps in the program. "Grant writing helps fund the programs, but partners in the community can provide a lot, too. One year, a local business bought all the after-school supplies, like calculators, for us. But the business people who help us get so much more out of it. I've seen them take their ties off and play hoops with the kids."

Last fall, representatives from the SUN program were invited to go to San Diego to give a presentation for the National Community Education Association to discuss how to encourage park and recreation departments, government agencies and schools to communicate.

"We are groundbreakers. We were invited because we are so different," says Richardson. "We are very lucky that this program has become a vision for Portland's school districts, but communication among all parties is the most important part of making it all work."

She adds, "There's a reason why *labor* is smack in the middle of the word *collaboration*."

For more information, please visit SUN Community Schools online at www.sunschools.org, or call 503.988.4222.

About NRPA

The National Recreation and Park Association is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing park, recreation and conservation efforts that enhance quality of life for all people. Through its network of nearly 19,000 recreation and park professionals and citizens, NRPA encourages the promotion of healthy lifestyles, recreation initiatives, and conservation of natural and cultural resources.

Headquartered in Ashburn, Va., NRPA works closely with local, state and national recreation and park agencies, citizen groups and corporations to carry out its objectives. Priorities include advocating favorable legislation and public policy; continuing education for park and recreation professionals and citizens; providing professional certification, university accreditation, research and technical assistance; and increasing public awareness of the importance of parks and recreation. For more information, visit www.nrpa.org.



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