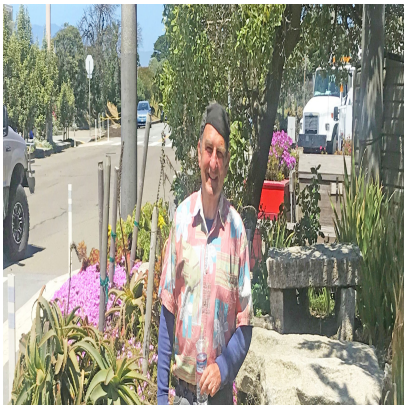

La Playa Park neighborhood activist coins a counter to NIMBY â?? ICABY, I Care About My Back Yard

Description

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San Francisco often seems divided into opposing camps: the NIMBYs and the YIMBYs. But Steve Ward, the 69-year-old sparkplug of the La Playa Park Coalition, thinks of himself as a partisan of a third way: the ICABY.

That odd acronym stands for â??I care about a backyard,â?• and as Ward pointed to a series of improvements in his neighborhood on a recent afternoon, he proudly said, â??they were built by ICABYs.â?•

La Playa isnâ??t an officially sanctioned name for the neighborhood that stretches south from Golden Gate Park along the Great Highway and merging east into the Outer Sunset. Itâ??s a reasonably affordable edge of the city, home to an eclectic mix of older, blue-collar families, recently arrived Millennials looking to finally buy a home, and surfers attracted by the proximity of Ocean Beach. When itâ??s running, the N-Judah streetcar line provides a direct, if lengthy and often crowded, link to downtown.

Steve Ward doesnâ??t like to call himself an activist â?? but heâ??s managed to recruit volunteers to make improvements in his neighborhood. (Photos by Bill Snyder)

Ward, a San Francisco native, has lived near the beach for about 25 years and has surprised himself by becoming a neighborhood activist â?? a term he dislikes. â??Activist sounds like conflict and stress. Thatâ??s not me,â?• he said. Ward is, in fact, rather low key. But that laid-back demeanor belies his ability to recruit a cadre of neighborhood volunteers and the diplomatic skills to enlist the help of San Franciscoâ??s notoriously Byzantine Department of Public Works and Park and Recreation Department.

Tired of trash-filled divide

The backyard Ward cares about is a block-long stretch of center divide between La Playa Street and Lower Great Highway. Before Ward and Pat and Buffy Maguire, the owners of the nearby Java Beach cafÃ©, decided theyâ??d had enough, the stretch was weedy, filled with trash, discarded syringes and squatters.

The first stage of the renovation transformed the northern end of the center divide into a mini-park, with benches fashioned from boulders and paving bricks. Octagonal flagstones cover the ground and an exotic stand of purple pride of Madeira and other perennials define one end. Built later, the southern end of the La Playa Park sports two bocce courts, a birdbath, and a carefully tended garden that extends for nearly half a block.

The garden is replete with several varieties of succulents, geraniums, snapdragons and other colorful perennials. Thereâ??s a patch of edibles, including oregano, rosemary and collard greens, along with a fig tree and an olive tree, all of which keep the ICABYs busy weeding, planting, and watering.

Ward and the Maguires were the instigators of the project, but the renovations wouldnâ??t have happened without help from neighbors and the city, Ward is quick to say. Dennis Webb, who owns a construction company, donated the use of heavy equipment needed to build the park; another neighbor brought in loads of rocks and paving stones.

A Community Challenge Grant funded the extension of a water line needed for irrigation. The Department of Public Works installed it. Although San Franciscoâ??s city government is infamously bureaucratic, Public Works and other agencies, including the Police Department, â??were very responsive,â?• Ward said.

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But itâ??s the dedication of the volunteers and â??their labor of love,â?• that deserves the credit, Ward said. A core group of neighbors handles day-to-day maintenance.

Bocce: A family tradition

Ward grew up in North Beach, a neighborhood where bocce is popular, and recalls watching his grandfather play. It was natural, he said, to suggest building the courts at La Playa. â??Itâ??s a game of finesse, but itâ??s convivial and relaxing.â?•

On a sunny Sunday afternoon in May, a group of eight seniors was enjoying the weather while they played bocce at La Playa. â??Itâ??s a social contest; being together with people, laughing and having fun. Yes, itâ??s competitive but thatâ??s not the main thrust,â?• said Barbara Elbl, a retired therapist who often organizes the games. Ward, she said, is â??a good spirit,â?• and because he knows the game so well, â??our rules come down to â??Steve says.â??â?•

Neighbors enjoy a game of bocce ball at La Playa Park.

Being relaxed, or at least stress-free, is a recurring theme in Wardâ??s life. After graduating from San Francisco State University, he entered law school at the University of San Francisco. But he quickly realized the law wasnâ??t for him. â??I was feeling stressed. Law seems like a life of conflict. Do I really want to do this? I thought.â?•

After dropping out of USF, Ward explored a series of varied career paths in San Francisco. He ran his familyâ??s donut shop for a time, had his own talent agency, and eventually went to work for the San Francisco Newspaper Agency, which handled the logistics of producing the San Francisco Chronicle and the old Hearst-owned Examiner. He was a district manager for a time, riding herd over a crew of delivery people, drove a truck and repaired newspaper racks.

Ready for a change, Ward reinvented himself yet again, returning to San Francisco State where he earned a teaching credential. He taught special education for about 15 years before retiring.

Now that La Playa Park is running so well, Ward is giving some thought to other neighborhood issues, like the need for a medical clinic and how to manage growth, particularly housing, on the cityâ??s Western rim. Although heâ??s conflict-averse, Ward knows that working on broader issues might be a bit contentious.

How does that fit into his laid-back persona? Ward answers with a paraphrased quote from former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. â??Itâ??s easy to avoid conflict. Just donâ??t do anything.â?•

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Date Created
15/05/2021
Author
snyder

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