

Neighborhood Improvement Projects

In-studio guests: Mary Rodriguez, President, Greater Griffith Park
Neighborhood Council
Delphia Jones, Director, Operation Clean Sweep, Board
Of Public Works

Insert/Video Clip guest(s): Mary Rodriguez, President, Greater Griffith Park Neighborhood
Council

Host: Lee Alpert

Lee: I want to thank you both for joining us here on Neighborhood Café to talk about something very important, neighborhood improvement projects that the city is now doing in conjunction with Neighborhood Councils. Mary you are the President of the Greater Griffith Park Neighborhood Council. Tell us a little about what you do, how you got into it, and where is Griffith Park for those rare viewers that don't know where it is.

Mary: I have been a community activist in the Los Feliz area for quite some time. Prior to being on the Neighborhood Council I was involved with the Los Feliz Improvement Association, but when the Neighborhood Councils began or when they began to form, I joined! Overall, I've been involved for about four years. Two years of which we were forming and now almost two years on the actual certified Neighborhood Council. Recently, I was elected president.

Lee: It's great to have you involved. I know I first got started with Neighborhood Councils when Riordan was the Mayor of Los Angeles. Through the charter reform, Neighborhood Councils were created and I was asked to be the new president of the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners (BONC). Being the President of the BONC, gave me wonderful opportunities, like seeing different parts of the city. As BONC president, I tried to initiate programs and get Neighborhood Councils off the ground. Professionally, I would like to say that it was a pleasure working with the Neighborhood Councils. Tell us a little bit about the neighborhood improvement projects and what they are, Mary.

Mary: Lee, you do look very familiar. Have I seen you on television before?

Lee: I've done one or two of these shows and I'm also honored to serve as the public affairs program host for Time Warner's Cable Parallax Form that has been around for about a decade. We've had some of the Neighborhood Councils in the area come on our program. Let's talk a little bit about the projects that you're doing in your neighborhood, Mary. We're fortunate enough to have you bring with us a video tape of one of these projects that you've been involved with. They do say that photos speak a thousand times more than words, so let's take a look.

<<video clip>>

Mary: My children were in a neighborhood elementary school, Franklin Avenue Elementary, and a lot of the parents were beginning to discuss where should we send our children to middle school? I was really surprised to find out that the majority of the parents would not send their kids to the local middle school, so I began to question why? I went to the school, which we're standing at now, met some of the teachers, and we walked around to the classrooms. I thought

that school was great, but I was missing something. It looked like a penitentiary. It was all one color, beige, and it had a chain-link fence all around it. It gave you the feeling of being stuck in a cage. I began to think that this appearance really does give the parents a negative image of the school, and that was probably the primary reason why parents didn't want to send their kids there.

What I did was work with the principal and other community members to try to improve the school. We made changes that made a huge impact in the community. The community is proud of this school because it's beautiful. We beautified the school writing a series of Neighborhood Matching Fund Grants that the City of Los Angeles offers to neighborhoods, through the Board of Public Works. The first grant that the community got was to do the landscaping outside of the school. Once that was accomplished, we came in and we started working in the interior. The first place we started was, here with this statue. It's called the vanishing race. It's a beautiful 1935, WPA statue of a Native American and I really see it as the heart of the school. It was completely covered with paint and graffiti and so we wrote a Neighborhood Matching Fund Grant (NMF) and we used that as the base to write a number of other NMFs. We have now raised over \$20,000 to completely restore the statue in 2000. In 2001 we even won a preservation award from the Los Angeles Conservancy. That's something that not only the school, but the community is very proud of. After that we started landscaping all around the statue. All of the trees, the palm garden, the olive garden, is a result of the student's work. Students planted every single one of these trees and we have a rose garden around the center. We're also partnering with other communities, like the Silver Lake Garden Club. They helped us get all of the roses planted and they maintain them every year.

As you can see we've really been putting all of our time and effort every year in trying to improve this school. The last project or projects that we completed were six tile mosaic murals, that were placed throughout the campus designed by six local artists. Picking the mural walls was interesting. We first chose a wall that had been neglected in our neighborhood, called the Hoover Street Wall or Hoover Street Walk. It's called that because there's a stairway that walks up to Prospect Avenue from Hoover Street. The triangular wall has graffiti all over it. The artist that the community sought out was Ricardo Mendoza. Our first project coordinator was Mary Frances Smith Reynolds who worked on another project with Ricardo in the neighborhood. As you can see, it has three triangles. One triangle goes down to Prospect Ave. You can't see the stairways when you look at it from afar it'll just look like one mural, but actually the water flows down the stairway into Hoover St.

<<End video clip>>

Lee: Mary, outstanding, what a great job! You really are a community leader. We need many, many, many more of Mary's doing the great work in our community and I mean that sincerely. Really, what a difference you've made in that community, both at the school and now the mural that you're having done. The Neighborhood Council is also helping you achieve all these goals, as well. I really am not the one that should be praising your good work, it should be Delphia Jones. Delphia tell us a little about what you think of what you just saw and what the Department of Public Works in particular is helping community activists like you. What is Operation Clean Sweep and how does it help?

Delphia: This is a wonderful example of people from the community having a vision of what they want their school to look like and implementing that vision and that's what the Neighborhood Matching Fund is all about. We offer grants of up to \$10,000 for people to implement neighborhood improvement projects, like what Mary has done, and also as you just saw, to improve schools. I have just come under the umbrella of Operation Clean Sweep and we have a

motto there that says, "Government cannot do it all". In order to be effective we must partner with the community and remove graffiti, for example. Let me just mention that when you have a graffiti problem or any problem that the city can help you with, please call 3-1-1. They will assist you in removing graffiti anywhere, free of charge, in Los Angeles. If people were to volunteer to clean-up their community, again, free of charge, we offer rakes, brooms, and shovels. Whatever people need to clean up the community. We also go into elementary schools and implement an anti-graffiti curriculum. At Operation Clean Sweep, we're doing a lot to help all of Los Angeles.

Lee: It sounds wonderful. If I were a member on a Neighborhood Council, as is Mary, and I decided that there's a special project that we want to do but we don't have the funding for it, we can get some funding through Operation Clean Sweep? Is that how it works or is there something else involved?

Delphia: We actually are in the application process now. We offer a series of workshops that people can come to and we will train them on how to fill out and submit the grant. We also have a website lanmf.org where people can go on the website download the application. You can actually fill-out the application on the website and download it and submit it to Operation Clean Sweep.

Lee: You also mentioned 3-1-1, right? That's the toll-free phone number that the city has for non-emergencies, correct? When they call there they should just mention Operation Clean Sweep, correct?

Delphia: Absolutely. They can ask for Delphia or Michael Espinosa.

Lee: Mary, tell us what your experience was working with the Neighborhood Matching Fund.

Mary: The Neighborhood Matching Fund people are extremely helpful and were nothing but a pleasure to work with. They were very helpful and encouraging in all our efforts. They are constantly trying to encourage you to complete the project and they also try to make every step of the project a success. On behalf of the Neighborhood Council I want to thank you Delphia.

Delphia: We all know that everyone can do it. The program is set-up for people to be successful. The overarching mission of Neighborhood Matching Fund isn't so much these beautiful projects, but it's really to teach people how to navigate, promote process, and how to apply for a grant. We also teach people how to gather people in their community, obtain consensus and implement their vision. I think you did a great job in doing that, Mary and so did the Neighborhood Council. Once people adopt a median or paint a mural, they say, "I did that, and I can do something else!"

Lee: That also gives the community a sense of ownership because you have actually helped pay for it, you made sure that it happened, and it's not just something that someone has come and done for you. You really have a part of your heart and your soul in that particular project.

Delphia: It's really a teaching tool, especially because you take it into a school. It's fun because most children, who help out during a project, can't even dig a hole or use a shovel. You had to teach them these very basic things and they just got so excited about it and as they saw the school start to change, and the teachers began to see the school change, they started coming more to support it.

Lee: Do you have to be a Neighborhood Council or a nonprofit in order to apply for a NMF? Not that you shouldn't be a member of your local Neighborhood Councils because we all should be.

Delphia: We are actually encouraging grassroots organizations and there couldn't be a group that comes together solely for the purpose of implementing the neighborhood improvement project. No, you don't have to be a 5013C or nonprofit, and you don't have to be part of the Neighborhood Councils. Although we always are encouraging all Neighborhood Councils to apply for this wonderful program that we offer.

Lee: That's wonderful. That sounds like it's just an opportunity open to everyone in the city.

Delphia: Absolutely.

Lee: How are you publicizing and how are you getting the word out, other than through Neighborhood Councils?

Delphia: We have a mailing list. We mail out information to everyone here on Channel 35. There are a number of news articles that come in the local press, as well. We have weekly press releases going on and you can also come to your local council office and get information there. As always, we encourage you to visit our website.

Lee: I for one did not know of the NMF. I know I've seen it in Seattle, when that city was developing something similar to the Los Angeles Neighborhood Councils, which has been a tremendous success. They've actually built major projects.

Delphia: Funny you mentioned that. This program was based on the program that's operated so successfully in Seattle. We flew up there, took a look at their projects, came back, and replicated it.

Lee: You brought with you some great slides of examples of some of the Matching Funds Program projects. Why don't we show those to our viewers, and while the slides are coming up on the screen, can you tell us what each of those projects are and give us an idea if you know what they cost?

Delphia: Yes. This is a graining project that costs about \$5,000. It's a median that's being beautified. You can see the beautiful elephant topiary there. This is in South Los Angeles. That is an artwork that is hammered out metal. It's actually a silhouette of a child. It's a very beautiful project also at a school and it really adds to the ambience of that school.

This is a community identification sign, which many people in Los Angeles want to have a sense of community, so they're seeking to put up signs. When people drive through the community they know where they are. This is a stairway, that as you can probably imagine, was really ugly and adding the tiles helps tremendously. Many of these tiles were designed by young students. It really beautifies another area that was plagued with graffiti and illegal dumping.

Let me just mention that we do match the labor during these projects. You can match your grant with volunteer labor which we value at \$15.00 per hour, you can provide a cash match if you're a Neighborhood Council, which is very easy to do. Each Neighborhood Council receives \$50,000 from the City of Los Angeles.

Lee: If you have a project idea and the talent, but don't have the funding for it, you can build something? I'm a contractor and am willing to make a nice project. You're saying that every one of those contractors that works in that project will get credit at \$15.00 an hour that goes towards the match of the dollars they get from the city?

Delphia: Absolutely, they can either obtain credit at \$15.00 an hour or they can be paid for their professional services. We can value their professional services, for instance, if you have a landscape architect working on a project, their services might be valued at a bit more than \$15.00 per hour.

Lee: That's great, but we have to make certain that our viewers understand these are for public projects, not for your personal projects at home.

Delphia: Exactly we and the Neighborhood Councils are working for the community as a whole.

Lee: Mary tell us what the next project, in terms of the matching grant projects that the Greater Griffith Park Neighborhood Council has in mind.

Mary: The Hoover Street walk that we talked about earlier is the one that we're going to be concentrating on now. That will begin soon and it will take a while to be completely implemented. We are also going to include landscaping. That's the first big one that we're going to be doing.

Lee: Let me ask you, does it make a difference? Does it change the sense of the community? Do people take more pride or do they just go back and paint over a mural, for example? What do you think the community response has been in your community?

Delphia: I'm going to use a term that we often use, which is "empowering people." They learn that they can positively impact their community. You imagine that there's an eyesore in your community, you obtain a grant nine months later, and you beautify that area. This program is a catalyst for change in the community. People understand that they can access funds from the city, we help them with the permit process, and they can make a positive change. We love it for that reason. Operation Clean Sweep is about partnership and about government working together with the community.

Lee: I could also imagine that this is also helpful for the City of Los Angeles in a fiscal manner because you have to match the grant. You don't have to pay 100% of the project, just get the approval match it. It works best for both parties in seems.

Delphia: That's an excellent point because often times people would like the city to beautify their median, to plant trees, and when they go to that department they tell them that funds are not available. You can turn to the Neighborhood Matching Fund and make your project a reality.

Mary: All the projects that we've done definitely makes a difference in the community. Especially because it's an immediate change that people can see. Once you've implemented something or you've implemented a few projects, they see that it's for the better. I do share a concern about whether or not it will stay that way or if people like me will be more active in the community. I'm also concerned because communities change with new people coming in and going out. The good thing about that is that your Neighborhood Council will always be in existence. They will always help with these small things that make a big world of change.

Lee: Do you think it lasts? How about the maintenance issue?

Delphia: I think it lasts in the sense that one of the things that we require under our grant process is that people commit to a maintenance agreement. We do monitor that agreement and if it's not being properly maintained we do try to bring another group along to assist.

Lee: I have a lot of friends in the real estate business and I do know that these projects do make a difference, especially in property owner's pocket books. I guess it looks like the check is here even though we didn't want it, which means that we're just about out of time. I want to thank Delphia Jones for stopping by and sharing some great information from the Board of Public Works and in particular your great project that you have, Operation Clean Sweep. We also want to thank Mary Rodriguez from the Greater Griffith Park Neighborhood Council for sharing your projects. If you have any questions or topics you'd like to see covered in future shows you can simply email your comments to Department of Neighborhood Empowerment at www.lacityneighborhoods.com or call (866) LA-HELPS toll-free and for information about city services call 3-1-1 your one stop call to City Hall. For everyone here at the Neighborhood Café, thank you very much for joining us and we will see you on our next program, I'm Lee Alpert.