

13th Street Community Park and Garden

BY HEATHER SCHOELL

If only every vacant lot had such a dedicated group of neighbors. The concrete slab at 13th and C streets SE has long been a wasted space but is now acting as a conduit, bringing people together for the sake of turning an eyesore into a “site” for sore eyes. The lively Feb. 23 fundraiser for the park attested to the neighborhood’s support.

Who They Are

There are about 15 core people guiding the course toward a sustainable community park and garden with trees, shade and a place for the elderly of Kentucky Courts to sit or plant. The group that is the 13th Street Community Park and Garden operates as a registered DC nonprofit corporation, raising funds to get this plan in motion, and has enjoyed the support of Mayor Adrian Fenty and Ward 6 Councilmember Tommy Wells. The DC Housing Authority, who owns the site, is working their end

to make this happen, and Casey Trees and Ginkgo Gardens are ready to lend their support.

Eric and Christy Schwalb live directly across the street from the lot, so they have a vested interest in beautifying the space. They started the ball rolling, holding the first planning meeting in April 2007 soon before their son was born. They, along with Rich Lukas, spearhead the 13th Street Community Park and Garden, opening their home to host meetings and fundraisers.

Liz Guthrie is front and center, bringing her skills as a landscape architect to the table, and as a resident, bringing her enthusiasm. “I’m really excited to have been part of it. ... I really believe in green space in the city, and I think this neighborhood is going to see an amazing change by having this as a neighborhood park,” she said at the fundraiser. “It’s an interesting partnership, a partnership between the community, and I think the design reflects that melding.”

Guthrie worked previously on a community garden in New Jersey and noted, “People gardening side-by-side really opens up some interesting conversations. And culturally – what people choose to grow in community gardens varies culturally.”

Architect Colleen Garibaldi is also immersed in this project, connecting with people and watching as their planning takes shape. “We started working together, figuring out how we were going to do this. We held a community charrette...an opportunity for us to gather...to seek community input.” The charrette offered a variety of ways for people to contribute. “We had a plan

of the corner, and it gave people the opportunity to draw what they wanted. Some people who were not comfortable speaking out could draw a diagram, or they could see a visual and think about it.”

Tom Wiener has lived on the block of the empty lot since 1984. “It’s like an empty house that for years has been sitting there, and somebody moves in – you just feel like it lifts the block,” he said.

Sarah Heffern, a more recent neighbor, said, “I live in an apartment, so I don’t have a yard. This will give me a chance to garden and a place to hang out with the neighbors. It’s a great idea.”

The Plan

The proposed design was born of community meetings between the core members, residents of Kentucky Courts and interested neighbors. At these planning meetings, they brainstormed as to what this space should be – what it should offer, what it should look like, and how it should function. The current plan, which was unveiled at the fundraiser at the Schwalbs’, boasts five trees, a large grassy space, a picnic area under a pergola and 20 to 25 gardening plots. The design bears in mind the elderly residents of Kentucky Courts, so plots will be designated for them, some of which will be handicapped-accessible, and paths will be smooth for wheelchairs and walkers. Garibaldi noted the “green” aspect of the plan, including their idea to use recovered lumber for the pergola.

How You Can Help

You don’t need to be an immediate neighbor to help achieve and sustain this green space. To help launch this project, monetary donations may be made through their website. Additionally, 13th Street Community Park and Garden needs gardening supplies, and they can always use a hand in fundraising, planning, designing, building and later sustaining the green space. For more information, visit www.13thstreetgarden.org.

Neighbors brainstorm about what the park and garden should be.



The proposed design.



The Schwalbs host a successful fundraiser for the cause.

This is part of a monthly series profiling nonprofits that serve our community. To suggest an organization to be profiled, please e-mail Heather Schoell at hschoell@verizon.net with “suggestion” in the subject line. ■