

THE EVOLUTION OF A COMMUNITY GARDEN

By Lee Hart, Community Gardener

The Linda Vista Community Garden is the brain child of soft-spoken, low keyed, Janice Pezzoli, a married with child woman with a very large dream. I first met Janice in April 2011 at an overgrown parcel of land behind the Bayside Community Center. I had come to plant vegetables at what I had been told was a community garden. What I saw was far from any garden I had ever seen. This place was an overgrown field awash with thick shrubs, wild waste-high grass, cracked sidewalks, a forlorn gazebo, wooden planks, and a couple of giant wooden spindles used to wind steel cables lying on the ground. There are visionaries and there are those that follow them. Janice is a visionary who has the capacity to engage people in her vision even when it's not clear where she is leading them.

At our first meeting, I got caught up in Janice's determination to build compost bins, not that I knew what a compost bin was, just that it was one step in the process of being able to plant my own organic vegetables, and so I enthusiastically dove into the process. As Janice and her husband , Keith Pezzoli, and I struggled to pull the wooden pallets up on their edges and nail them together to form the sides, Janice kept assuring me that I would not only be able to grow vegetables here, but that I would get an invaluable education in organic gardening. That is exactly what happened. Fortunately, the following Monday more people came from all over the community to start the process of clearing this wild land. For the next 5 months, Hmong, Latinos, Mexicans, Mite, African Americans, cauations and others, of all ages worked side by side every Monday night and a few Saturdays. With so many languages being spoken, sometimes the communication by hand signals got lost in translation, but the job got done and relationships were built across language barriers.

Today, I am happy watching my vegetables flourish in the rich soil I helped create. In spite of finally having my garden plot after many months and many labor hours alongside my neighbors, I had no concept that it was to be anything more than a community garden--which is valuable in and of itself. But, it turns out that that is not the full extent of Janice's vision. I had seen some of behind-the-scenes work she had done over these months and was curious what motivated her in such an undertaking. As we sat in the Garden, Janice began to talk about creating the next step from the Garden, the Bayside Environmental Learning Center, located here at Bayside in Linda Vista. She sees school children, teens, mothers, fathers, grandparents, and senior citizens as having a place to not only grow their own vegetables but to learn new skills and participate in the Food Movement right here in Linda Vista. Janice stated that it has become evident so many have lost touch with how food is grown, what it looks, taste and smells like when it doesn't come pre-wrapped, frozen or otherwise processed. A community garden offers the opportunity of learning about food as it comes from ground, sharing the knowledge of food from all the cultures represented in the community. It can bring children back to their root ancestors' foods. School children learn math, reading and finance through the process of planting their own vegetables, all under the warm sun and fresh air. How do you figure out how many seeds will grow to maturity? How many heads of cabbage will grow in your allotted space? How much water will be required? How do you know what kind of soil you are starting with? Adults and young people have an opportunity to develop leadership skills as they work together to maintain the garden. Working alongside diverse cultures toward a common goal you learn understanding and cooperation. Alliances are built digging in the soil together.

But back to those early days and how we got from that bleak plot of land to where we are today, a fully functioning garden. In the beginning, until the grants started coming through, the

community gardeners relied on tools borrowed from Bayside and each other. Janice continued to tell us about the grants she was applying for while she continued to work alongside everyone every Monday and many times during the work week on her own and perform all the other administrative tasks of scheduling outside vendors to do the more professional work, meeting with potential partners and donors, scheduling gardening classes and arranging visits to other neighborhood community farms for us. The work was slow going for all of us because of the scarcity of tools and equipment. The one thing we sorely lacked was a wheel barrow. Until funds were donated, we used the only one we had ---one with a flat tire which couldn't be repaired!

As grants began to come in Janice was able to rent a jack hammer and an electric tiller, and yes, purchase a proper wheel barrow. With the proper equipment, we moved faster to clear the land, cut down overgrown grass, hack brush and shrubs, jack hammer broken concrete sidewalks, build better compost bins, pick up trash and transport it to the dumpsters, cut down diseased trees, dig garden plot trenches, measure, cut and lay chicken wire for gopher barriers, amend the soil, and carry hundreds of buried boulders and twigs and grass. Finally, it was done. We selected our plot, signed our contract (agreeing to abide by the rules of organic gardening and good citizenship that the gardeners collectively wrote) and began to grow our vegetables.

Fast forward to November 1, 2011 when Janice agreed to let me interview her. Janice and I sat at one of the beautiful picnic tables built by volunteers from HP, surrounded by garden plots with lettuces, winter tomatoes, peas, bok choy, kohlrabi, collard greens, cilantro, kale, fava beans, and more.

LH: What motivated you to start this project?

JP: In July 2010 my position at UCSD was being phased out. At the same time my

husband, Keith Pezzoli, was about to embark on a summer journey down the West Coast by bicycle. The journey's goal was to travel by bicycle with a follow-on vehicle to roll out a new non-profit, The Global Action Research Center (www.theglobalarc.org) to empower community based organizations by linking them with university researchers. Many of the stops were at community gardens where we were invited to camp. I learned along the way that community gardens are wonderfully diverse culturally, socially and ecologically. People grow and eat food harvested from their own small community plots. All the gardens were inspirational. Each one made me realize that I could and should grow my own food in my own yard; that I should become part of the Food Movement that is sweeping this country.

When we returned home, I began to educate myself on organic gardening as I planted an edible garden in my front yard. During my summer travels I learned about the nationwide Food Movement to create a sustainable environment for ourselves and our children. Now, at home, I was learning about the abundance of educational courses being offered right here in San Diego.

In October 2010, I began taking organic gardening courses and volunteering at local organic farms. I discovered Victory Gardens San Diego (VGSD), a non-profit, which offers a hands-on beginning garden course at the Wild Willow Farm. Here I learned a different approach to gardening---Learn by doing. My homework was to take the basic lessons learned from the course and apply them to my home garden----- plant and learn from your results. I connected instantly with VGSD's mission --- *Helping people start growing their own food through collaborative garden builds, hands-on garden education and community outreach.*

Soon after my first class with VGSD, I approached Jorge Riquelme, Executive Director of Bayside Community Center. I asked him if there were any garden opportunities at Bayside. His first response was "our budget has just been cut, we don't have funding." He did however

offer the opportunity for me to write grants to obtain funds for a garden project. Jorge connected me with Grover Diemert, Community Activist and Bayside Board Member, and Christopher Nayve, Director for the Center for Community Service-Learning at the University of San Diego who had been already meeting to develop a garden somewhere in Linda Vista. Everything started to fall into place rapidly after that. December 2010, we began collaborating with Montgomery Middle School which has an existing school garden. We quickly found out that the community was not allowed to garden on school grounds. Currently Bayside is working with the San Diego Unified School District on establishing a shared use agreement to provide community members with access to the garden. In the meantime, we turned our sites on a 5,000 sq. foot plot of land behind the Bayside Community Center

In February 2011, we applied for funding from the Nissan Foundation. I learned quickly that there can be a long waiting period between submitting the application and the announcement of the award. While waiting for this and other grants, we decided to move forward. With the help of Adriana Gallardo, the community advocate at Bayside, we began to conduct interactive meetings to gauge the interest in a community garden. In March 2011, our first meeting brought together 38 community members many from cultural organizations such as the Van Lang Vietnamese Language & Culture Center, Convivio Latino, Familia Indigena Unida and the Lao Hmong Family Association. We continued to meet as a group to talk about their wants and desires to garden. The meetings turned into work parties and every Monday we cleared one little patch of land at a time

When we received the \$15,000 award from the Nissan Foundation to support a garden coordinator and garden supplies, we were well on our way to making the garden a reality. The Linda Vista Community Garden at Bayside groundbreaking ceremony on July 21, 2011 was truly a celebration. Representatives from Nissan Foundation, LISC San Diego and

Councilwoman Lorie Zapf (Council District 6) and Jorge Riquelme had the customary shovel dig photo op. At the heart of it all, local community members celebrated the groundbreaking with their families and neighbors.

LH: How many grants have you received from whom?

JP: Actual monetary grants have come from The Nissan Foundation, LISC San Diego, Downtown Breakfast Rotary Club, Motorola, Ford Motor Company, and several individual donors. Other organizations have contributed volunteer hours, i.e., HP, USD, UCSD, Healthy Works, and Victory Gardens San Diego.

LH: Aside from having to wait a long time for the funds, what are your challenges with the grant writing?

JP: The major challenge I'm finding is locating grants that pay for administrative costs. Many organizations only offer support for tangible goods such as garden tools, sheds, fences, supplies and equipment. I'd like to see more funding opportunities that can go towards offering garden courses, providing leadership workshops, and most importantly providing employment opportunities for community members to run the garden. This model is much more sustainable than relying on outside organizations to keep the garden running. Typically businesses want to donate their employees' time/labor during an annual day of service. We are extremely grateful to the enthusiastic, gifted volunteers we have. They are wonderful, but they are not the stakeholders. First and foremost, we need to empower the community members to run the garden operations themselves. If we want to sustain efforts in this food movement --- bringing local food into the community --- we need to cultivate personal and cultural relations and community values that encourage healthy food choices, production and consumption.

LH: What is next?

JP: We hope to create the Bayside Environmental Learning Center based. The new Center will educate our children and our community how to be active participants in producing healthy food of their own. Sustainability is an important part of this. The Center will employ learn-by-doing methods that underscore the importance of water conservation, recycling, culturally diverse farming traditions, soil composition and enrichment –including the vital role worms play in composting and garden ecology. Bayside Environmental Learning Center will be an active place for sharing knowledge that can be used in every back or front yard garden throughout Linda Vista.

As we move forward I hope more individuals will join us and become gardeners. We have regularly scheduled pot lucks so we can all get to know one another better. Please join in and share your knowledge about farming, food, recycling, and anything that contributes to making our community more healthy and happy. Our outdoor meeting location is a beautiful space with shade trees and lush garden beds full of healthy fruits and vegetable.