Breaking Down Barriers and Building Communities

by Mohammed Nuru and Ariane Bicho

Imagine driving down Third Street and feeling the existence of a colorful, old culture. Imagine shopkeepers' doors open for trade in African art, fabric and carvings while passersby purchase organic food and visit restaurants featuring a variety of African cuisine. Imagine street performers sharing their culture through dance and storytelling.

While San Francisco boasts Japantown, Chinatown, and the Mission District (cultural home of the Latino community), African-Americans have an opportunity to build the city's southern corridor into an African Center, a center for African-American culture. Mohammed Nuru, SLUG's Executive Director, says community building here can give the community a stronger flavor of Africa. "Third Street has historic value," he says. "It's a trading center for African-American goods and we can build on this current character."

Resources within the community include San Francisco's first Opera House, which continues to operate; Candlestick Park; Southeast Community College; the Bayview Branch of the Public Library; several homes for people in recovery, and the city's only working farm. The views of the East Bay and the Bay Bridge provide spectacular panoramas. In April, the community holds its annual People's Earth Day (see ad on page 7) featuring multicultural entertainment, speakers, food, children's activities, environmental information, toxic tours, booths, workshops, and green vendors.

There's been talk of many ideas for the Hunter's Point Naval Shipyards, home to one of the largest independent artist communities in the country. On Feb. 16, a citizens' advisory committee unveiled a $200 million draft master plan to the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency aiming to create 8,000 jobs in

Conflict Resolution and Empowerment in SLUG's Youth Garden Internship

by Joshua Bloom

Since the beginning of October, SLUG has employed 24 teenagers from public housing in a paid garden internship. Teens are gaining training and multi-disciplinary education while serving their communities through landscaping, gardening and distributing fresh produce. The Youth Garden Internship is funded by the Mayor's Office of Children, Youth and their Families and operates at two sites: Alemany and Hunter's Point. The program is an extension of an 18-month pilot which took place at Adam Roger's Park.

Through the pilot program and extensive community greening work, SLUG learned that people need assistance implementing non-violent conflict resolution. In the past year, at least four SLUG employees were hospitalized from violent conflicts, two with gunshot wounds. Three employees witnessed sayings, several were imprisoned for violent crimes, and the continued, p. 5
the civilian-operated shipyard. The new plan divides the shipyard's 525 acres between business, art, education, housing and research uses. Potential new tenants include technical and business schools, university-level research institutes, the multimedia industry and MUNI. Other uses include sports fields, a small boat harbor, bicycle paths and wetlands restoration.

The San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners, in partnership with city agencies and low-income communities, is helping Bayview Hunter's Point and similar communities embrace the slow and arduous process of building community through gardening and greening. In the Bayview community, SLUG is looking at an opportunity to build a community garden as part of a nuisance abatement tool created by the City Attorney's Office. Under a court-ordered clean-up of abandoned lots with property owners' consent, lots would become available as sites for urban community gardens.

Last year, SLUG created a partnership between the residents of the Alemany Housing Development and city agencies to build a community garden there. First, the Mayor's Office of Community Development provided funding to build gardens. Then the San Francisco Housing Authority provided funds to operate an employment development program. SLUG used the funds from the Housing Authority to fund a Landscape Apprenticeship Program enrolling 26 men and women from Alemany, Potrero Hill and other developments. As these apprentices learned about sustainable horticulture, landscape construction and received business training, they also built the community gardens. SLUG then turned the apprenticeship program into a landscape contract to beautify the development with landscaping improvements. Currently, SLUG is establishing maintenance contracts between graduates of the program and the city’s Housing Authority. "The people who built the gardens eventually will have their own maintenance and grounds keeping business taking care of the gardens," says Nuru. Because of the above work by SLUG and Alemany residents, the Mayor’s Office of Children, Youth and their Families funded an after school program for teens to work in the gardens.

Tiki Hadley, President/Director of Resident Management Corp of Alemany, says as a result of the gardens, "There's a big difference in the way people feel. Kids are actually getting jobs and not standing on street corners, and if they are, they aren't our kids.”

SLUG's Youth Internship Program brings teens together from the Alemany, Shoreview and Hunter's View communities. In Bayview Hunter's Point, Rev. Willie Carter, President and Executive Director of the development's Resident Management Corporation, says, "[the youth program] is a link for togetherness. It's beneficial to breaking down barriers between public housing developments that separate themselves between territorial rivalry." And he adds, "The biggest attraction is that the kids can earn money. There's not a lot of organizations focusing on paying youth.”

To successfully build viable communities takes hard work and what Nuru calls the “layering effect.” In Alemany's case, the capital injection provided by the Mayor's Office of Community Development and the San
father of one female employee’s children was found shot dead in a gutter. To constructively address this violence, a conflict resolution expert was hired as part of the Youth Garden Internship to provide the teens with 16 hours of group training, and to select individual teens for training in conflict intervention and mediation.

More than anything, this process has given the teen’s a venue for expressing their concerns about violence, and brought their issues out on the table. This article is a discussion of one issue that surfaced. The point of this discussion is not to further vilify and stereotype inner-city youths. Rather, it is to examine the causes and implications of this violence, and to articulate SLUG’s role in addressing the interns issues.

November 30, 1994

Today we had a conflict resolution workshop as part of SLUG’s curriculum for the Youth Garden Internship. One of the teens named Darnell announced that his partner — an African-American — was jumped at school by a Latino gang. Darnell calmly explained that his friend’s hand was broken and his face smashed with a trash can. Darnell and his gang were planning on going to the school tomorrow stripped (carrying guns) to get revenge. As Darnell is already on probation for a 1990 murder conviction, he has sworn not to get caught for anything less than killing someone. He says he doesn’t want to fight, but because his friend’s case demands action, he is planning to shoot the Latino students tomorrow.

Need for Something Positive

Teens need something important to do with their time and a place to fit in. They need to be supported by their community. According to Lester Clark, Teen mentor at Alemany Public Housing, most of the violence has to do with drugs and a lack of positive outlets. “Teens need a way to invest in their community through something positive.

They need their parents and community backing them up. Most of the youths don’t have nothing to do. It’s not them, people they hang with influence them. We need to do something positive for them. Coming out of the projects, you are in poverty. Parents can’t give you much, and being a teen you want things, so you sell drugs.”

Satti Odeye, a Youth Garden intern with SLUG, elaborates the point. “Society holds up a Lexus, and that is what you need to be big. A Lexus really ain’t about nothing. But everybody wants to be big. And a Lexus is what you need. So everybody wants it. And in the hood, the only way to get that kind of money is to sell drugs. So that’s what you do.”

Need for Justice

In the conflict resolution workshop, another need became evident — the need for justice. Darnell’s announcement drew mixed reaction from the other teens. Some became fully engaged while others acted disinterested. A few of the boys came off hard. “You got to do what you got to do. It ain’t nothing.”

Mira, another intern, took the position that Darnell should let the incident go. “Retribution won’t get you anywhere. You go and kill those Mexicans, and you won’t kill every one. Your boy will be all alone at school, and they’ll come back and get him. Then one day, you’ll be shopping in the Mission, and you’ll slip, and that will be the end of you. You may be carrying a gun, but they’ll straight slit your throat. You just got to let the thing go... I have lost too many people to that mess. Most of my family are gone, including a twelve-year-old brother. Friends used to tell me ‘Mira, I’m so worried for you, you’re all wrapped up in that mess.’ Now, I don’t do all that any more. I am going to go to college and stay in the community to help my people.”

Against peer pressure, Darnell was clear that violence wasn’t a good answer. “I know everyone slips eventually,” he said. “I don’t want to go

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Breaking Down Barriers

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San Francisco Housing Authority worked together enabling community members to build and maintain their own gardens. This simultaneous investment created one of another kind: the community members' investment in their gardens and the landscaping of their neighborhood.

Lisa Dollard, Special Projects Coordinator for the Housing Development Division, says, "Organizations like SLUG are critical. It doesn't do the Housing Authority any good to pump money into the developments without the residents involvement with design factors, work and maintenance. The commitment to upkeep is much better with resident involvement."

Can SLUG's gardening and landscaping mission really, in the long run, make a difference to these communities? Think about personal change in your own life. If you're an experienced gardener, you've probably experienced rejuvenation in the simple act of replanting a root-bound plant— as you give a plant room to grow, you give yourself room, too.

Communities also need to experience this feeling of rejuvenation to grow and change. Building a new "pot" for a community without their investment overrides this process and those who generously provide the new pot grow full of resentment when their community investment is ignored or destroyed.

Disenfranchised communities are rootbound simply because they are not aware of their strength, they do not know how to make things happen and they lack the necessary capital to grow, says Nuru. "We've found a way to reach out to the community through jobs and training, to really start people working," he says. "As a result, many people are benefiting individually and community-wide." Nuru says the Alemany Housing Development is becoming part of the Bernal Heights Community. "It's important that people in Bernal feel part of one community instead of feeling, "Hey, that's a project, we can't go there."

Alemany resident Tiki Hadley, says "For many, many years, the Bernal Heights Community overlooked us. Now, people from Bernal Heights are volunteering to work in the gardens and water the lawns. They realize we are people too."

As disenfranchised communities green their surroundings, they give neighboring communities a reason to visit. "We want this to happen on a larger scale," says Nuru. Communities such as Bayview Hunter's Point, which includes the Naval Shipyards, has an opportunity to establish a cultural center and shopping district. As people find reasons to visit, Nuru says, "they will learn it's friendly."

Community building starts with people from the ground up. With the skills and expertise of a group like SLUG and its loyal members, paired with the capital from city agencies including the MOCD, the SFHA, San Francisco Recreation and Parks, and the Neighborhood Beautification Fund, all neighborhoods will have an opportunity at equality and when this happens, democracy has a better chance of functioning justly.

Nuru says community building is a multi-layered issue and he would like to see the city create a task force of agencies that can work together at simultaneously achieving the same goal. "We feel we help people build communities better than anybody, we are masters at what we do," says Nuru. "All of our programs are growing and this wouldn't happen if the city was not a major contributor."
Conflict Resolution
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back to jail.” But passivity wasn’t acceptable either. His partner had a broken hand and smashed face. Something had to be done.

“In that case, you will have to call the cops,” suggested one of the adults. The room filled with teenage laughter. To the teens, the notion that police were a real resource for obtaining justice seemed like a ludicrous idea. Underlying this perception is the root of teen violence. When society doesn’t provide positive outlets and doesn’t deliver justice, it fails to create legitimacy. Teens look to gangs to deliver outlets for their efforts and seek to maintain the honor of their gang at any cost. In Darnell’s gang, there are four divisions by age. If someone in your set is hurt, the men from that division get retribution by attacking the perpetrator. If the problem is too big, they look to the men in the division above them for assistance.

“Everyone needs structure and a place to fit in,” says Mohammed Nur, SLUG’s Executive Director. “Since they don’t get it any other way, they create gangs based around fighting.” Nur emphasizes the importance of discipline and community involvement with the teens. “Raising and disciplining youth takes a whole team. Somewhere along the line, discipline was lost. In Africa, when you see a teen smoking on the side of the road, you pull over your car. You whip his butt, take him home to his father, and his father thanks you. Teens need to be a part of the community. They have gone off on their own trip. People need to get to know their neighbors, sit down and talk so that senses out of the life of a thug. They giving young brothers and sisters a chance, because, these days, people really don’t take the chance.”

In SLUG’s Youth Garden Internship, gardening places education in context. Learning relates directly to work with real resources and real effects. Community gardening goes further than the traditional vocational curriculum in that it takes place in the community with the support of community and for the betterment of the community. Also, gardening gets urban teens back in touch with the earth and their role in the natural ecology.

“The garden job changed things for me because I got something to do, something to keep my mind occupied,” says Fredricka Michael, a 17-year-old Youth Garden Intern with SLUG. “In my individual [planters] bed, I can do whatever I want — it feels like nature is taking over when I watch things grow in the garden. Long as you’re taking care of it, the plants are gonna grow. With my daughter, you gotta watch her every minute. But with a garden, you do the right things to a plant and nature does the rest. It feels good to be working in my own community because the gardens make the whole area around Alemany look good.”

Potentially, community gardening represents the best of service learning: it is not just about service, but community empowerment. By turning a trash-

Work Day at the Alemany Youth Farm

everybody knows what the issues are — where the kids are at.”

The Power of Youth Gardening

SLUG aims to involve youth in building community through hands-on gardening and greening projects. Far from being “just about vegetables,” community gardening is a powerful vehicle for inner-city teens to empower themselves and their communities.

Darnell writes, “A lot of love to SLUG, who brought a brother to his

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Lookout: New Tomato Virus

In the early fall of 1993, a new virus/disease of tomatoes appeared in Orange County tomato fields. The virus, which is not yet named, is spread by the greenhouse whitefly. Symptoms include yellowed leaves with green veins, thickening of the leaves, and not much of a crop.

So far, the disease has only been confirmed in Orange County, and in Oceanside, a town in Northern San Diego County, but researchers worry that infected seedlings are sold into a new region, whiteflies might spread the disease there as well.

Check your garden for whiteflies. These tiny snow-white flies, which flutter about when disturbed, suck sap from plants. You can discourage them by being sure plants have enough sunlight and water and are not over-nourished with nitrogen. (Use compost or other slow-release nitrogen fertilizers rather than a water-soluble type.) After reading labels carefully, treat whitefly infested plants with a summer oil (such as Sunspray) or insecticidal soap. Remove and discard badly infested plants.

If you see a plant that you think might have the new virus, call the U.C. Cooperative Extension at 759-9059 to report it before you remove the plant.

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