

Youth Reclaim Their Neighborhood Park, Enlisting The City's Support And Using Environmental Design Principles

For many years, Lauderbach Park was a favorite place for children growing up in the crowded apartment complexes of southwest Chula Vista to play and hang out with friends. But, over the course of a decade, the park had gradually become too dangerous, taken over by gangs and prostitution, drugs and alcohol, litter, and graffiti. It lacked restrooms and a functioning water fountain. Transients camped out in the park and children attending the adjacent elementary school learned to simply avoid it.

Enter: A group of five high school students who'd grown up in the neighborhood and had many happy childhood memories of Lauderbach Park. Dismayed that children no longer played there, they were determined to make the park a safer and more hospitable place. Beginning in June 2007, working with local *promotoras*—Spanish-speaking health promoters who served as the students' mentors—the students launched a coordinated effort to make concrete improvements.

In preparation, the students received basic training in leadership development and policy advocacy training. They then began interviewing residents and identifying "hot spots," both within and around the park, in need of improvement. Next, they invited city officials to attend a public meeting in the park. The students were pleasantly surprised when

representatives of nearly every department actually showed up, from police and public health to parks and recreation, to listen to their concerns. Finally, the youth and *promotoras* developed a wish list of improvements which, through discussion and compromise, were shaped into a set of recommendations and presented to the city council.

With park safety a top priority, the coalition's efforts centered around a transformation of the built environment based on a set of principles called Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED). CPTED helps increase positive interaction between a place and its users, discouraging criminal behavior while at the same time encouraging people to "keep an eye out" for each other. In Lauderbach Park, the height of bushes was reduced and a tall, overgrown chain-link fence was removed and replaced by a low, transparent one, making once-hidden areas visible and less inviting to criminal activity. In addition to new landscaping and lighting, a children's play area and restrooms were built,

more picnic tables and trash cans were installed, and pedestrian pathways were enhanced. The student leaders took special pride in a new water fountain that actually *worked*.

Some 400 people attended the park's official re-opening in September 2008. Since then, more families and children visit the park, drinking and smoking are banned, there are plans for a community garden, and organizers are enlisting local businesses to "adopt" different areas of the park.

Meanwhile, the students' efforts have not gone unnoticed. They received the 2009 Public Health Champion Award from San Diego County, and the 2009 Golden Footprint Award from Walk San Diego, a regional coalition promoting walkable communities. They are now at work on Los Niños Park, where gang activity and teenage drinking has been on the increase; and five other Chula Vista parks are now slated for revitalization adopting the model of a *promotora* and youth working together.

For more information:

Healthy Eating, Active Communities:

www.healthyeatingactivecommunities.org

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