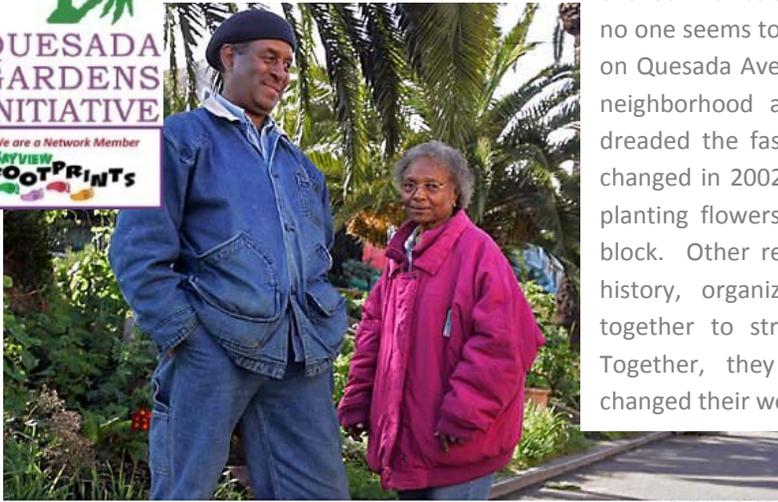


## Quesada Gardens is what community looks like



Chronicle / Kurt Rogers

What do you do when the block you live on has been so choked with substance abuse, violent crime and garbage that no one seems to remember better days? Most folks who lived on Quesada Avenue in San Francisco's Bayview Hunters Point neighborhood a decade ago pulled down the blinds and dreaded the fast walk to a bus stop or their car. But that changed in 2002 when **Annette Smith and Karl Paige** started planting flowers and vegetables here and there around the block. Other residents jumped in to help, create art, share history, organize block events, and commit to working together to strengthen the community where they lived. Together, they formed the Quesada Gardens Initiative, changed their world, and inspired all those around them.

[www.QuesadaGardens.org](http://www.QuesadaGardens.org)

People just like **Annette Smith** and **Karl Paige** are stepping forward all the time to make a difference, *today*, where they live.

Road maps to social and environmental change are often drawn outside the communities we all hope to strengthen. Not this one. This road map is a distillation of experience that honors community workers,

## Community Building "Road Map"

empowers small informal groups, and represents putting localization theory into grassroots practice. It emerged from the complexity typical of today's multidimensional urban setting, and still thrives on simple acts of neighbors helping neighbors. Quesada Gardens is a real place where new approaches to sustainable positive change started with the people who live there.

Good community-building policy and practice helps to identify existing effective efforts, deflates barriers to them, and directly nurtures them with targeted resources.

- ✓ **Start with the "positive."** Whatever the problems are that face a people and place, there are just as many strengths. We just aren't accustomed to looking for them. Assets can be both physical and social. In the case of Quesada Gardens, it was both. As weedy and trash-strewn as it was, the urban median strip that ran up the center of the block held potential. The human potential on the block was also untapped until two retired residents began sharing a love of growing plants and the wisdom that it would make a difference.
- ✓ **Resist predetermined agendas and strategies (even your own).** It is natural for

us to invest more in our own ideas, visions and interests than those that come from others. In the early days of Quesada Gardens, we got a lot of phone calls from great organizations and governmental agencies that wanted us to be part of their efforts. Most *itches* had merit. We were surprised to be so popular. We tried to do it all when just keeping our pulse going was a success. Ultimately, we made a policy of setting aside external agendas and goals until we had established our collective identity. Within the Quesada Gardens group, the most successful organizers have been the least attached to one strategy or objective over another. Even now, we

- maintain fluidity of purpose and approach as the group's membership changes.
- ✓ **Break through isolation and barriers to justice.** For community-builders, this directive is strategy, process and goal all wrapped into one. Modern communities suffer division between members. Community members hunger for a sense of connectedness to one another and to place. People from marginalized groups usually go "unheard." *Anything* that meaningfully connects two or more people, across the lines that so often separate us, will return success...whatever your goal may be.
  - ✓ **Acknowledge difficult realities.** A positive approach to problem-solving doesn't mean ignoring reality. Neighbors often think "the problem" is obvious, but then discover other neighbors have different concerns. Help them list *all* the issues, including any structural problems such as social injustice that may come up. Then help them list the things they *like* about where they live.
  - ✓ **Honor consensus and collective vision.** Trust that small groups working through a positive process can accomplish great things. You can help by supporting such a group in creating a unique vision plan that connects problems to assets. In the case of Quesada Gardens, that was a drawing of a median strip turned lush, and a plan that honored Karl and Annette's work, and set a goal for a highly visible display of community involvement.
  - ✓ **Find faith in an honest process.** Community-building requires patience, a sense of fair play, and a willingness to share power and credit. Nothing reveals an agenda that exists outside a community's welfare faster than putting an organizational logo or public official's name on a project.
  - ✓ **Build the capacity of what already exists, first.** Even if effective work happening in a place is a bit "off-topic" in relation to your organization's agenda or strategy, gently incorporating your interests into existing work takes advantage of existing momentum. It will save you the effort of building trust and networks, or save you from the failure that so often results from fast-tracked community participation strategies. Concentrate on making strategic investments that will stay with the community after you leave it.
  - ✓ **Let those with deep roots in a place lead.** Defend resident leadership at every turn, even to your own organization, if you want to achieve true community investment in social and environmental change. Building community capacity does not mean doing the organizing work yourself, even if your intentions are good.
  - ✓ **Allow communities to self-define.** The people who live, work and play in a place should be empowered to paint the character of that place and define the local systems that govern it. Projects often come and go from communities, leaving behind a pale version of what was designed at a home office. Internal community wisdom remains untapped, professional or quasi-professional capacity is left without investment, and project outcomes suggest a one-size-fits all sensibility. Community-defined and led projects may suffer reduced economies of scale, but thrive on internal investment, cultural competency, and project distinctiveness. Even projects with broad scope, such as a transit project that runs through many communities, can benefit from the incorporation of community-building principles.
  - ✓ **Resist uniformity,** and search for opportunities to express the cultural, social

and environmental uniqueness of a place and its people (e.g., follow principles of environmental design and draw wisdom from the immediate community so that

infrastructure, buildings, businesses, programs and more end up serving the people for whom they are intended).

Whatever our personal or professional goals may be, we can all contribute to building community and local systems by supporting emerging policy trends.

- ✓ Support all kinds of **local-living** efforts from sustainable streets and traffic planning to shop local campaigns, local hiring policies, and local buying incentives that kick in when public benefit dollars are spent.
- ✓ Encourage community **foundations and other philanthropists** to open community building categories for grantmaking; seek out good community-generated efforts worthy of capacity-building while resisting proposals for importing expertise from outside the community; reconsider giving strategies that require the sort of regranteeing that puts another, often political barrier between resources and innovative grassroots work; grow leadership development programs; and prioritize grantee candidates that operate from within the target population or area.
- ✓ Reinvent **civic and public engagement** strategies that turn sparsely attended and politicized “town hall meetings” at a central place into honest conversations with people where they already gather such as church basements, branch libraries, and community centers.
- ✓ Encourage **governmental agencies and policymakers** to find the line between governmental and community programming, resist top-down community-building that grows the public sector at the expense of the community sector, and rethink how to strengthen grassroots efforts while reducing demands on small informal groups that have proven themselves effective.
- ✓ Push to ensure community building is incorporated into components of **non-local projects** (for example, a transit project that might benefit from community-generated art at hubs).
- ✓ Establish a **universal metric of social cohesion** so we know both where there is community building work to do and how to evaluate our success.
- ✓ Invest in the emerging **community sector** of professionals and quasiprofessionals working in and for the community. For instance, hire and buy from within your community, and consider centering *your* career in your own community.

## Community-supportive policy and practice

People just like **Annette Smith** and **Karl Paige** are making a real difference, *today*, where they live. It’s time to invest in them, and in the small informal groups and networks that together are changing the face of San Francisco and cities like it.