

*Jeffrey Betcher, Quesada Gardens Initiative to SF Department of the Environment Commission
Bayview Hunters Point neighborhood meeting 12-3-2013*

Thank you President Arce and Commissioners. And thank you to the activists, advocates and neighbors on both sides of the table. You inspire me, and I remain your student. My name is Jeffrey Betcher. I live in Bayview on Quesada Avenue, and I am a co-founder and the director of Quesada Gardens Initiative.

Quesada Gardens began over 11 years ago when Karl Paige and Annette Smith started planting flowers on the block where I live, a block which was ground zero for the drug trade at that time. Neighbors broke through fear and isolation to connect around this positive activity, and together quickly transformed the block into a safe and beautiful passage through town.

In 2007, Quesada Gardens Initiative received an EJ grant to increase the capacity of neighbors to grow food locally, improve our Bayview Footprints communications network, and expand our volunteer base.

As a direct result of the EJ grant, we:

- Developed 6 community garden spaces and 10 backyard gardens.
- Increased subscribership to our bi-weekly community building news vehicle, *Bayview Footprints Local News*, which now reaches several thousand neighbors.
- Documented over **6,000 involved resident contacts** and **40,000 hours of service**.
- Provided meaningful experiences in the heart of Bayview for visitors through **150 group tours and volunteer days**.

In addition to our first Quesada Gardens projects on the 1700 block of Quesada, we created the



2011 Bridgeview Garden event

Bridgeview Teaching & Learning Garden and the new entryway

where weeds, rubble and trash once ruled. The garden produces food year-round in a mini orchard and planting beds containing healthy soil. Its beauty and accessibility have been enhanced by an accessible public gathering space, art bench and art glass sign, a project that brought local artists, arts organizations and tradespersons together in common purpose. The Bridgeview Garden won the *2012 Best Green Community Project* from the SF Neighborhood Empowerment Network.

One of the backyard gardens we built is the showcase food producing garden in at **Cornerstone Missionary Baptist Church**, which forged new partnerships between QGI, the church and SF Links, Inc. The launch event focused on environmental injustice, food access and health disparities.

In part because of support from DoE, QGI has advanced the concept that grassroots, non-governmental, community-emergent, place-based projects are essential to achieving our shared urban environmental and social policy goals.

Quesada Gardens Initiative and similar projects are entry points for your



Cornerstone Missionary Baptist Garden launch with SF Links, Inc.

programming. We are the grassroots communications network for your messages. We are the spring of community knowledge and wisdom you need to inform your policy decisions. We are the network of trust that mitigates suspicion of external forces.

We try to be all of that with skeletal infrastructure. We try to be all of that in the midst of the social disruption brought on by unprecedented urban development. We try to be all of that while our community still struggles with historic inequities and disempowerment of residents.

Groups like QGI are called upon more every day; and we want to serve. Yet we are the least resourced part of the urban change equation. Whether the goal is a more sustainable environment, better health of residents, economic vitality that is inclusive and just, dependable disaster preparedness ... our success depends on socially-cohesive communities. DoE's support has helped QGI contribute to a new model of community building that moves beyond public participation and civic engagement toward true community empowerment.

I believe that grassroots efficacy remains disconnected from the public and philanthropic institutions that are discovering its usefulness to their objectives. The demand for empowered and socially-cohesive place-based communities is escalating faster than the infrastructure of those communities and the informal networks that populate them. Understanding grassroots community building, revaluing it, funding it ... these are among the most urgent social policy challenges facing urban change-makers.

That is why I am so grateful for the EJ grant QGI received. It was a glorious exception, and led to community victories about which we can all be proud.



Serenity explaining how snapdragons actually "snap."

Consider the words of Serenity Williams who is part of the Bridgeview Garden community, and who won a Youth Gardening Award from the National Gardening Association for her efforts:

In my neighborhood garden we are planting food for everyone in our community. The garden is colorful and has healthy snacks. The healthy snacks are fruits and vegetables like strawberries, squash, cilantro, mint and apples. The goal of our garden is to be able to give food to people who don't have much or just to give good healthy food. This garden I help in is shaped like a rectangle and its right outside of my home. Inside our garden there are stones to walk on and different levels.

The role I play in the garden project is planting seeds and watering everything in our garden to keep the plants healthy. I spend an hour and a half in our community garden every week. The good things that our garden has done are that it has grown good healthy food that we have eaten.

Environmental education is important because natural food is really good for the body instead of candy. My efforts helped to care for the environment because people can just walk to our garden instead of using gas to go to the grocery store and spend money.