

US EPA Southwestern Region Environmental Achievement Award Nomination

Jeffrey Betcher and Quesada Gardens Initiative

Area: Environment and Community

Nominated by Dr. Toye Moses, Executive Director, Southeast Community Facility Commission

The physical environments of our nation's urban cores are changing rapidly and for the better. The social environments are changing too, but often on tracks disconnected from the planning and economic investment that drives physical transformation. A few savvy practitioners are on the front line of this reality searching for better ways. Jeffrey Betcher is one of them.

Smart urban planners and sustainability experts creating more livable, sustainable cities are part of a "new urbanism" that is already proving better for some than others. Residents wonder if our cities are being remade for a more affluent, future population instead of for the people who live in them now.

Sadly, vulnerable city-dwelling populations of working families, seniors and youth are being pushed to the suburbs and exurbs. That's unjust, especially given that many people first migrated to our cities to establish a foothold on a better life for their families. It's also contrary to the bottom-line interests of policy makers themselves.

Betcher is the Co-Founder and first Executive Director of the *Quesada Gardens Initiative*, an 11-year old community-emergent organization in San Francisco's historically underserved and environmentally challenged Bayview Hunters Point neighborhood. He is also a resident of that neighborhood.

After spending much of his career in the national violence prevention movement, Betcher was so inspired by work he and his neighbors conceived and led, work that quickly transformed a place notorious for environmental blight and social isolation into a model of beauty and community unity, that he quit his job and plunged into the uncharted waters of community building.

Under Betcher's leadership, the *Quesada Gardens Initiative* has grown small acts of courage into gardens, public art and gathering spaces that thrive on diverse grassroots involvement, all at little cost to the public.

Betcher is respected for connecting research about social cohesion to old school organizing that honors grassroots wisdom and a community's right to define its own environment. He is growing a "bottom-up" community building alternative to the community outreach, social marketing, and agenda-driven programming of organizations external to our communities. He believes we can revalue the cultural moorings fostered by established residents, and that we can retain urban assets that cannot be drawn into a map.

In a period of dramatic urban change, work such as designing population density around transit hubs and cleaning up brownfield sites is essential. But the land and quality of life in our cities will thrive all the more when contemporary urban populations have real power, and community leadership is permitted to emerge unrestricted. Betcher's work is critical, because the alternative is to lose precious cultural continuity and aspects of urban diversity that we'll never get back.

Betcher's awards include the *Crissy Field Community Heroes Award* from Crissy Field Center/Golden Gate Conservancy, and a *Lifetime Achievement Award* from the Southeast Community Facility Commission. His publications include *Seva* Community-Based Health Policy, Practice and Advocacy Recommendations*, and the Tedx Talk *Hug v Tech: Traditional Community in the Digital Age*.