

National City creates colorful gathering place

By [Allison Sampite-Montecalvo](/staff/allison-sampite-montecalvo/) 5:18 p.m. April 22, 2013

NATIONAL CITY — A portion of land in National City dubbed Butterfly Park will finally live up to its name.

Hundreds of people put in dozens of hours during a four-day build to help transform the unused land on 20th Street and Palm Avenue into a community gathering space.

The project is part of an ongoing effort in San Diego County to restore and expand access to outdoor space that is otherwise considered a blight on the community. Butterfly Park is the first of the project's two community-build demonstrations in San Diego County neighborhoods in 2013.

From Thursday through Sunday, men, women and children ages 5 to 80 participated in woodworking, masonry and gardening to enhance the desolate area.

Volunteers built a butterfly wing-shaped performance stage with amphitheater-style seating, mosaic bench seating, tables and stairways and also planted vegetation to attract butterflies.

The project was led by Pomegranate Center, a Washington-based nonprofit organization that works with communities to imagine, plan and create shared public places.

Olivewood Gardens and Learning Center, an organization that motivates students and families to pursue healthy lifestyles through organic gardening, environmental stewardship and nutrition education, pitched the idea for a community gathering space in November 2012.

National City was one of 10 cities in the county to participate in a competitive process and was awarded a grant from The San Diego Foundation, according to Executive Director Healy Vigderson.

Pomegranate Center Executive Director Milenko Matanovic said its mission is to prepare communities through training and mentoring programs to do this kind of work.

"When we create opportunities for people to be at their best together, extraordinary things happen," Matanovic said. "Our model, what we want to share with municipalities and cities throughout the country, is that this should be part of the menu of their community. We create an excuse for their participation and what's left behind is a gathering place."

During the planning process, a steering committee was created comprised of city staff, residents and police officers.

"We put together the big community meeting in January and all these wonderful ideas came out of it," Vigderson said. "There's this transfer of knowledge that he (Matanovic) uses to engage the community in this thoughtful dialogue."

It's from this project that Matt D'Arrigo, CEO for A Reason To Survive, became Pomegranate's San Diego affiliate, which trains Pomegranate "fellows" as leaders in work to expand the concept.

His organization focused on program development and design and hosted weekly community art workshops in preparation for the build.

Jodi Brisebois, 45, is an artist working in National City and one of 17 fellows.

"The project has a real ripple effect with the opportunity and relationships to expand outward," Brisebois said.

Felicia Shaw, director of arts and culture for The San Diego Foundation, said it was with seed money from donor Paul Eichen that the project was able to get off the ground.

"With his support, we've been able to launch this demonstration project," Shaw said. "We've never quite done anything of this scale."

The total cost for the two projects is about \$250,000, split down the middle, according to Shaw. The second project is expected to be built in City Heights, using the same model.

"It's all about civic engagement," Shaw said. "The community is coming together to transform the space into something that's vibrant and attractive."

National City Mayor Ron Morrison said the project instills a sense of pride in residents to take ownership of something they

helped create.

“It’s another good example of how this community comes together,” he said.

The project received funding and support from various partners including the Myron Eichen Memorial Foundation, Rokenbok Foundation and Tully’s Coffee, through its Gathering Grounds program.

The work was unveiled and celebrated Sunday evening, with National City residents gathering for live music, food and drinks.

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