



This Garden Grows in a Parking Lot

Nov. 4, 2009

By Christie Williams

Roll Call Staff

For the past few decades, the corner of 13th and C streets Southeast has been an eyesore for some area residents. But this December, local residents hope to trade in their blemished landscape for a thriving community green space to grow their own fruits and vegetables.

The 13th Street Community Park and Garden project was spearheaded by Richard Lukas, a Capitol Hill resident who lives directly across from the proposed site, and a group of about eight neighbors.

The parcel of land, currently a littered lot with a lone trash bin, sits adjacent to the Kentucky Courts retirement community and is owned by the D.C. Housing Authority. In September, the project was awarded \$650,000 in stimulus funding from the Department of Housing and Urban Development to develop the land and also purchase trees, shrubs, lighting and benches.

The plan received support from the D.C. Housing Authority's former executive director, Mike Kelly, and Ward 6 Councilmember Tommy Wells.

"I've lived on the Hill for 10 years, and the attention by leadership has been wonderful," Lukas said. The community garden will serve as a great place for neighbors to participate in individual or group gardening, he said.

According to Lukas, the number and size of each plot is not yet determined. The 13th Street Community Park and Garden organization is still working out the details of how to choose participating members, by lot or on a first-come, first-served basis. Residents of the retirement community will, however, get first preference.

"It's projects like this that makes Capitol Hill feel like a small town," Lukas said.

The 13th Street Community Park and Garden also will be one of seven gardens highlighted in an upcoming documentary, "A Community of Gardens," by filmmaker Cintia Cabib.

The documentary will show that community gardens not only help to beautify a neighborhood, but that they also provide a source of healing for those "people who might be going through personal difficulties or health issues," Cabib said. For others, "it's a great place for urban residents to grow their own fruits and vegetables, and save money while eating healthier."

Another of the seven gardens highlighted in Cabib's documentary is the Melvin Hazen Community Garden on Sedgwick Street Northwest in Cleveland Park. The garden has historic significance because it is one of the original "victory gardens" from World War II.

"During World War II, there was a big push for people to grow victory gardens on vacant lots or on people's backyards, any possible sites," Cabib said. "Basically it was to help the war effort and to build morale."

Pomegranate Alley Community Garden, at 11th and I streets Southeast, is situated behind Ginkgo Gardens at 911 11th St. SE. "It's a small garden with only about 13 plots, and they get water from the garden center," Cabib said. "It used to be a back alley with a lot of junk and weeds, and people would be there taking drugs. It was not a good scene."

But now the view is much different. One of the gardeners featured in the documentary is an Albanian woman named Etta Klosi, who finds that her plot reminds her of home. Her parents have a big garden in Albania, and when they come to visit, they spend most of their time outside tending to Klosi's green space and offering gardening advice. "So, you have the family dynamic as well as the knowledge they bring from their country," Cabib said. "Community gardens uniquely link people who come from other countries. It's like a piece of home."

The other community gardens showcased in Cabib's documentary include the Washington Youth Garden (Bladensburg Road and R Street Northeast), Fort Stevens Community Garden (13th Street and Fort Stevens Drive Northwest), Common Good City Farm (formerly called 7th Street Garden at Third and V streets Northwest) and the C. Melvin Sharpe Health School Garden (4300 13th St. NW).

2009 © Roll Call Inc. All rights reserved.