

Giving Back - Wade Johnson Park, Oakland



Crew (left to right) Ramon Figueroa, Victoriano Martinez, Jorge Gomez, Dave Burgeno and Milton Vasquez prepare site for the installation of playground equipment

Prior to the extensive renovation, Wade Johnson Park was just a few benches used mostly by the homeless population in the area. When the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) moved some of its offices into the old Cole Elementary School, which is adjacent to the park, Police Chief Pete Sarna recognized a need in the community. He realized that there were many children in the neighborhood with very little to do. First, he founded the “Together we Can” program, the program strives to create positive relationships between youth and police officers in addition to bridging the gap as a safe haven for many youths in the community. Chief Sarna then invited the neighborhood children to join. The children eagerly accepted the invitation and the program quickly reached capacity, but not one child was turned away.

Next, Chief Sarna looked at the barren shell the park had become and envisioned it as a playground for the children. He set about seeking funds for a transformation. Eventually, he connected with KaBOOM! and their sponsor, Foresters, and the rest is history.

However, the grounds had to be prepared for the installation of playground equipment and neither OUSD Police Services nor the City of Oakland had the funds to do so. In stepped Rebuilding Together Oakland and their sponsor, McGuire and Hester. Led by Area Manager Brock Grunt and Project Manager George Malpass, McGuire and Hester donated their services to prepare the grounds for the installation. Without that contribution, the play-

ground equipment could not have been installed. Mike Hester, President of McGuire and Hester, brushes aside any words of praise with, “It’s rewarding to be in a position to give back once in a while. We have been blessed.” Kym Lugman, the Executive Director of Rebuilding Together Oakland, adds, “I was happy to bring our sponsor, McGuire & Hester into this wonderful community collaboration to build a safe play area for this neighborhood.”

With the grounds beautifully prepared, on April 30, hundreds of volunteers came out to install the play equipment, paint the basketball court, paint benches, install planter boxes, and complete other activities designed to enhance Wade Johnson Park. The renovated Park is within walking distance for children in the community and, with the location near the OUSD Police Services building, will provide a safe haven for neighborhood families to laugh and play together. Councilmember Nadel notes, “We really appreciate Chief Sarna’s vision and the assistance he received in making that vision a reality from the hundreds of volunteers and donors throughout the community and the city.”

The park is named after Wade Johnson, a community activist who founded the United Taxpayers and Voters Union, served on the Housing and Appeals Board and had the ear of many civic leaders, including then Chief of Police George Hart. One of his daughters, Dr. Vera Pitts, notes, “It is a tribute to his vision and civic involvement that his legacy includes a community park named for him.”

Photo below (middle): Bruck Grunt (M&H), sister of Wade Johnston, Kym Luqman (RBTO), Sgt Peter Sarna (OUSD Police) and Councilmember, Nancy Nadel Dist. 3
Photo below (left and right): Local children enjoying opening day at the park



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