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415.566.8393

P.O. BOX 27456

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Sculptor Manuel Palos delivers the final urn for the Dewey Circle Beautification Project. Photo by Katie Balestreri.

Beautification project comes full circle

Dewey Circle effort sets standard for neighborhood initiative in a partnership between community and local government

by Glenn Gullmes

Four years ago, a pedestrian slipped into a coma after being struck by a car at Dewey Circle. In response to that tragedy, a group meeting at nearby St. John's United Church of Christ under the auspices of the San Francisco Organizing Project decided to do something about the intersection of Dewey Boulevard, Montalvo Avenue, Taraval Street, Claremont Boulevard, and Kensington Way. They were determined to turn something bad into something good.

After several discussions with police and officials from the Dept. of Parking and Traffic, an array of temporary barriers was installed to control traffic flow in the area. The experiment was met with mixed reactions from local residents, many of whom complained about the ugly, cluttered look of the white plastic posts. While the new configuration succeeded at slowing traffic, the experiment failed in one important respect: it was an unqualified aesthetic disaster.

Instead of scrapping the redesigned traffic scheme, a group of concerned neighbors formed a non-profit corporation called the Dewey Circle Beautification Project (DCBP) in February 1996. After some minor modifications to the traffic plan, a community meeting was held on March 16 at West Portal School to present several design options and poll neighbors on plant preferences for the 90-foot diameter circle. About 75 area residents attended.

Subsequent committee meetings led to a newsletter and grass roots fundraising campaign. Presented with a \$25,000 budget, over 200 neighbors, local businesses and organizations made financial contributions ranging from \$4 to \$1500. Funds were also raised through the sale of T-shirts and sweatshirts. So far \$24,000 has been raised. Building on the initial success of last year's potluck fundraiser, another black tie party at the Forest Hill Clubhouse is being planned for New Year's Eve.

Once it became apparent that donations were substantial enough to move the project forward, PG&E removed the center street light Aug. 8, 1996, paving the way – or unpaving, as the case may be – for The City to break ground at the circle. For its part, Dept. of Public Works removed the asphalt from the circle, provided a water line and installed a curb around the perimeter.

The following week, 54 truckloads of dirt arrived. The City provided over 500 cubic yards of dirt and manure from excavations at S.F. State and the stables at Golden Gate Park. After the soil was prepared with a Rototill tractor, wooden cement forms were made. Cement was poured and on Aug. 31, Maccon Masonry delivered 1400 bricks. The bricks were grouted and laid in place the next day. An irrigation system was installed and 325 plants arrived on Sep.

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Dewey Circle Roundup

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21. Several work parties with more than three dozen volunteers helped with raking, digging, planting, mulching and bricklaying over the course of the project.

Neighborhood supporters gathered at Forest Hill Clubhouse on Oct. 27 to celebrate the project's impending completion and to thank everyone involved. After a few brief remarks by the project's directors and a presentation of a certificate of honor on behalf of the mayor, neighbors were treated to a round cake decorated to resemble everyone's favorite roundabout.

By Thanksgiving 1996, the circle was complete.

This neighborhood success story represents a labor of love on the part of many people. Dewey Circle is definitely a work of heart.

Overseeing the entire operation was local landscape architect Vera Gates who donated her design services. The finished design incorporates landscaped concentric circles with brick "spokes" culminating in urn planters radiating out towards the five intersecting streets.

The landscaping features drought-tolerant, low maintenance plants such as the Shore Juniper, Point Reyes Ceanothus, Day

Lily, and English Lavender.

Decorative urns similar to those found in Forest Hill were modeled by renowned local artist Manuel Palos. The urns will feature Dwarf Rosemary, Blue Fescue and Ground Morning Glory.

Several other professionals also donated their services, including graphic designer Jacqueline Jones and local bricklayer Vincent Leone. The project also received much needed support from the San Francisco and Forest Hill garden clubs.

Volunteers are still needed to help weed, pick up litter and maintain the area. Another project in the works will provide old-fashioned lamp posts, using a \$75,000 federal grant. Those looking to contribute to the ongoing upkeep of the circle should contact John Balestreri, President of the DCBP, at 681-0400. Donations, payable to "Dewey Circle Beautification Project" can be sent to DCBP, 241 Montalvo Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94116.

This community project provides a model for future civic cooperation and although a few finishing touches remain, everyone involved with the Dewey Circle Beautification Project can now be congratulated on a job well done. They've urned it.

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