

Michelangelo Garden

By Marsha Garland

When North Beach Neighbors was newly formed in 1980, our fledgling group quickly became the catalyst for the creation of Michelangelo Park.

Michelangelo Park, in case you haven't discovered this landscaped jewel in our neighborhood, is on the south side of the extraordinarily steep block of Greenwich Street between Jones and Leavenworth.

One day in early spring, a quiet teenage boy approached me on the street. He must have learned somehow that I was North Beach Neighbors' president. Apparently he and his immigrant family lived near me. He was with his grandmother, who spoke no English, and his was hesitant at best. It was obvious he adored and respected the elderly woman as he guided her along the street by softly touching her elbow. The shy young man explained his grandmother wanted to garden.

In China, the grandmother had lived on a farm. Now that spring was here, her heart ached for the soil and the joy of planting and reaping, and marking the seasons.

The teenager told me there was an unused garden on public land up the hill on Greenwich Street. Together we hiked the steep block and that's when I discovered the old run down Michelangelo Playground.

There was a rusty basketball hoop and a backboard for practicing tennis. The entire piece of land was covered with cracked tarmac and unruly weeds sprang through the cracks. A small brick shed with an old toilet was adjacent to the entrance. The east facing view from the virtually abandoned playground was stunning, as

was a huge splashy purple bougainvillia that for years had threaded its tenacious spiky vine through a high chain link fence.

At the east side of the property, where shade lurked most of the day, was a long narrow strip of land. The strip was about three feet higher than the rest of the parcel. It was overrun with brambles that threatened to shred clothing and gouge arms and legs. Worst of all, the heavy clay soil was tamped solid, had a concrete like consistency and there was no topsoil at all.

An enormous and beautiful stone retaining wall held the weight of Russian Hill at bay on both the south, north and west sides of the property, which had originally been gouged out of the hill and was many feet below the surface of Greenwich Street.

Apparently the strip of land had been a Victory Garden during World War II. During World War II a nationwide movement encouraged citizens to grow food in backyards and public parks. Eight billion tons of food was produced in Victory Gardens around the country. There was even a large Victory Garden in front of City Hall where Civic Center Plaza is now.

Wood divider remnants separating old garden plots remained in place and when I stooped to inspect the poor, unpromising soil I found an old marble. The marble was an antique and made out of white marble, not glass, no doubt brought to North Beach by Italian immigrants.

I promised the boy and his grandmother that I would investigate to see if there was a way his grandmother could grow her garden there.

North Beach Neighbors' Board of Directors went into action. It was soon determined that the property belonged to the SF Unified School District. It was intended for use as a playground for the

nearby Sarah B. Cooper Elementary School on Jones between Greenwich and Lombard (now Yick Wo Elementary School, another story for the future).

With the help of the San Francisco Conservation Corps, we cleared the land, laid out a grid and formed eighteen 10' x 10' plots. We carted in topsoil and nurtured the land with manure produced for city gardeners by the San Francisco Zoo.

Some of the first NBN member gardeners were Rhoda Feldman, Nan McGuire, Patricia Kemerling, John Reed, Peter Garland, Joan Danielson, Dorothy Hodges, Debbie Koehler, Russ Wigglesworth, Barbara Wyeth, myself and, yes, the teenage boy and his grandmother.

Not long after the garden was initiated, the Board of Directors had the vision to turn the entire parcel of land into a park. A very creative three-way swap was engineered by then Supervisor Bill Maher to trade the land between SF Recreation & Park, the School District and the Redevelopment Agency.

Nan McGuire headed up a successful fund raising program to help pay for the park. A landscape architect, who lived nearby, led workshops and we all participated in the design process. The Trust for Public Land became involved, as did San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners (S.L.U.G.). The I.L.W.U. put in some money and bought a memorial bench for Harry Bridges. Others bought and planted trees in memory of loved ones.

But this is the story of the community garden, not of Michelangelo Park. The garden was the catalyst for the park. Many of us discovered our connection to the soil and to the rhythm of the growing seasons.

After several months our Chinese grandmother stopped gardening. We never found out why and I can only assume the family moved, or maybe she died never knowing what her passion for the soil eventually led to.

I remember the exquisite joy of pulling up my first radish and the subsequent disappointment upon realizing it wasn't a bunch. Then there was the sublime pleasure of winning second prize (\$50) in a national recipe contest in "Family Circle" magazine and following contest rules using only Michelangelo Garden produce to create an unusual potato salad.

And I'm happy to report that contrary to some in North Beach who think I've lost my marbles, I actually found more: smoothly worn, irregularly shaped white Carrara marbles from Italy.

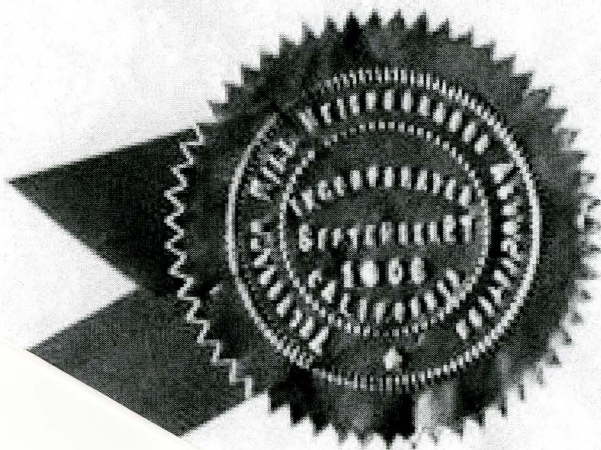
TELEGRAPH HILL NEIGHBORHOOD CENTER

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CERTIFICATE OF HONOR

In appreciation to Marsha Garland

In honor of her vision as founder and premier gardener
of the Michelangelo Community Garden.



Deborah Huckle
Executive Director

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President, Board of Directors