

## Willing hands launch playground

130-plus show up for Vallejo project

By RICH FREEDMAN/Times-Herald staff writer

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Rod Boschee, right, and Tom Cunningham from Pacific Gas & Electric Co. round the corners on boards with a router Wednesday as they help during the first day of building the new playground at City Park in Vallejo. (Chris Riley/Times-Herald) The U.S. Army Reserves worked side by side with the Solano AIDS Coalition. Parolees labored next to volunteers from Touro University. Republicans and Democrats who wouldn't typically share air with each other lifted large boards in unison.

Just another walk in the park in downtown Vallejo? Actually, yes. Sort of.

The kick-off Wednesday of the City Park community-built playground attracted 130 volunteers, numerous organizations and even a birthday party with the eye focused on the prize: A Robert S. Leathers & Associates custom-designed effort that's expected to be a neighborhood gem at Louisiana and Sacramento streets.

"It's going amazingly well. It's fantastic," said Adrienne Waterman, one of the playground's initial crusaders. "I don't want to jinx it, but I'd say we're ahead of the curve."

Dave Iannello, a construction consultant with Leathers, was impressed with the first-day turnout after working on "in excess of 200" such projects from the company's Ithaca, N.Y., headquarters.

"Exceptional," Iannello said of the help. "I know tomorrow (today) and Friday will be lighter on paper, but we hope to sustain it."

Tuesday's weather was "made to order," Iannello said.

No argument from the many volunteers, including Kathy Hoffman, Rep. George Miller's field representative. As one of the volunteer captains, Hoffman's duties run from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily.

"I tell people where to go and I'm real good at telling people where to go," said Hoffman, directing the board routing.

"It's a good group of people," she said. "I would do this again as long as my back holds out."

Lydia Pitchford, who lives across the street from the park, is more than just a volunteer.

"This is my park," she said, "and I'm excited about what's going on. I won't have to work so hard in keeping this park from the undesirables. I'm taking back my part for the kids, for the families and for everyone who wants to enjoy it."

Two groups from Mare Island -- the U.S. Army reserves and Touro University -- sent about a dozen volunteers.

The Army's 434rd Transportation Battalion "wanted to help the city of Vallejo and we wanted to come out because we are part of this community and we support it any way we can," 1st Lt. John Regnary said. "This is a great way to meet some people and let them know that we're here."

The other volunteers "have been positive about us being here," he said. "We've been enjoying ourselves the whole time."

Mandy Morris, a Benicia High School graduate and first-year Touro student, said classmates at the College of Pharmacy will be complemented by other segments of campus during the week.

"We're just excited to be able to become more of the community," said Morris. "Not a lot of people know about Touro and we're exciting about being here to give back."

Touro has contributed more than volunteers: It paid \$3,000 to sponsor a treehouse.

The support, which also includes two Guardian Angels from Stockton and free service from Medic Ambulance for the week, isn't surprising, Waterman said.

"I've been talking to people about this for two years and what I've found universally is that it's been considered a fantastic opportunity for Vallejo and for people who want to get involved," Waterman said.

Carla Seto spent her 39th birthday with 10 friends and family members volunteering.

"I told everybody, 'We're doing this for my birthday.' and that I just wanted them to come out and help me," Seto said. "I never have big parties. I'd rather help people."

Calvin Deville of the Solano AIDS Coalition said it's a great community project.

"I'm very happy to be part of it," Deville said. "It's going to make a big difference."

Shane McAfee, Greater Vallejo Recreation District general manager, manned the router and was more than happy to be outside working "instead of sitting at a desk behind a computer."

The playground will be "a renewal of spirit, a rebirth, a kind of Phoenix thing" for the community, McAfee said. "The biggest benefit will be a sense of ownership and participation, a sense of pride."

PG&E sent a contingent as part of its company volunteer policy, said Ronald Kennedy.

"It's a good project," Kennedy said. "It's going to benefit the community, benefit the kids, and at the same time we're learning about the history of Vallejo from the residents."

It's a week of doing something "that's really greater than the sum of the parts," Waterman said.

"This is one of those times when everyone can put aside the ways they seem to be different and agree on the value of this. It's going to be beautiful," she said