

Possible title: It takes a village to keep neighborhoods drug free

On the surface, it looked like any other city park. On closer inspection, it was a magnet not for the children and families who lived nearby, but for drug dealing and other illegal activity.

That soon changed. Teenage volunteers with a drug prevention organization and members of the local chamber of commerce decided to do something about it. Going door to door, they recruited neighbors to reclaim the park. When local residents saw the teens' involvement, they got their own children involved in the project, too. The youngsters worked side by side, pulling weeds, collecting garbage and even testing new, donated playground equipment. A couple local police officers embraced the project as well, voluntarily helping clean up the park. Over two short weekends, the dedicated group of neighborhood volunteers reclaimed the park.

Today, the park once again is a safe place for children and families. The people who spend time there keep it clean, and police regularly patrol the area to ensure its safety. The project created stronger bonds between residents who live around the park. And even today, it provides a permanent visual that underscores for participating youngsters the values their parents and the community hold dear.

The effort is a prime example of how people – equipped with vision, energy and the drive to make a difference - can work together to prevent alcohol and other drug use and build a stronger community. It is an example that every neighborhood facing a challenge to its livability should follow.

Though it can be natural for individuals to feel overwhelmed when addressing challenging issues that impact their community, people don't have to – *and shouldn't* – go it alone. There is strength in numbers. Residents, neighborhood groups, businesses, and civic organizations who work together not only have greater success tackling specific problems, but lay a solid foundation for keeping children safe and drug free and improving community health. It literally creates a small-town atmosphere of close-knit families and neighborhoods within our isolated, hustle-bustle world.

Whether the goal is to increase children's safety, hold a drug-free event or activity, or raise awareness about drug issues, the key to making a difference in your community is to keep it simple.

Take, for instance, a grandfather in Seattle, who wanted to improve the safety of an intersection near his home for children coming and going from school. For too long, he saw cars speed along the street the youngsters crossed. Though he wasn't even related to any of the children, the dedicated man cobbled together a homemade stop sign and regularly manned the crossing. The project, now known as "Adopt a Stop," was embraced by others in his community - and in no time spread throughout the city.

Alcohol- and drug-free block parties, neighborhood picnics and potluck dinners also are effective in generating positive activity and, if appropriate, bringing residents together to begin talking about – and solving – issues. Posting flyers on grocery store bulletin boards, at a nearby community center or in the commons area of an apartment complex is an effective and inexpensive way to advertise such events.

Residents looking to raise awareness about alcohol and other drug issues have appealed to their local civic clubs and made a presentation to members. Others have held fund-raising events such as book drives, using the money to create bookmarks. Printed on one side of the bookmarks was a list of ways to keep kids drug free, and on the other local resources where parents and others can get support. One such project resulted in about 1,000 bookmarks being distributed to parents during concerts in a park, a county fair and other community events.

Communities can also use potentially negative situations to empower youth. Neighborhoods struggling with graffiti have recruited businesses to devote an exterior wall of their property to a mural project, giving youth a positive outlet for their creativity. A fantastic byproduct of such a project is a greater understanding between youngsters and older generations.

The anthropologist Margaret Mead once said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

Time and again, that notion has held true.

To learn more about how to prevent substance use and make a difference in your community, contact the nonprofit Oregon Partnership, a statewide organization that provides substance abuse prevention education and treatment referral, at www.orpartnership.org, or 503-244-5211.