

Boeddeler makeover hastens feelings of safety in the hood

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Kate Robinson, Safe Passage program director, meets with volunteers at Boeddeler Park before they head out to their posts on Tenderloin street corners.

worth section, the slums of the TL and the target of the Tenderloin's \$1 million improvement project, a five-year effort 15 years ago that was funded by the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Fund.

Safe Passage has become the focal point for safe Tenderloin streets. It has grown from a low-five-figure budget and lots of volunteers to about \$400,000 a year, paid staff and lots more volunteers. All that in the last year, a reversal of fortune rivaling a fat contract for a forgotten movie star. Safe Passage has even become a bit of a growth industry in the TL, compensating more than a dozen residents part time as block captains.

The program began in 2008 after neighborhood parents met to voice concerns about their children walking the high-crime streets to and from school and after-school programs.

Along with TL Boys and Girls Club volunteers, they began escorting the kids. In time, the club, TL Community Benefit District and La Voz Latina became solid partners and sponsored the first painting of the route — "the yellow brick road" — on Martin Luther King Day, 2012.

MAJOR TURNING POINT

The pending \$200,000 OEWD grant, written largely by then-TL CBD Executive Director Hilliard and Kate Robinson of Chinatown Community Development Center, was viewed as a major turning point for the organization. After the city announced it, Hilliard left the CBD and became Safe Passage executive director in October. The next month, Robinson, a longtime volunteer, became program director. Soon, the Health Improvement Project came up with \$150,000.

"We operated from 2008-14 on very minimal funds," Robinson writes on Safe Passage's Website. "We received a few small grants in those seven years, but we operated mostly off of volunteer contributions and time, until the TL HIP process gave us this opportunity to grow. All of the organizations who made up the [original] Safe Passage committee are now board members."

Volunteers for the streets meet weekdays at 2:15 p.m. in the Boeddeler Park Community building for assignments. They don the yellow vests with reflective orange and gray stripes, common among street workers, and pick up the walkie-talkies that they use to report street conditions to each other and warn of erratic behaviors. Varying their days, they are on their corners by 2:45 p.m. and stay till 4 p.m.

Up to eight three-day-a-week corner captains typically work problem spots and get a \$235 monthly stipend; a half dozen five-day-a-week corner captains earn \$390.

For the fundraiser's display table,

Hilliard prepared photos to demonstrate what a difference a corner captain can make. One color photo shot in November at the worrisome southeast corner of Turk and Leavenworth streets, notorious for dope dealing, shows a motley adult crowd of 20 or so milling about while five little schoolkids in white shirts with backpacks and umbrellas try to maneuver through them.

The photo is juxtaposed with a shot she took there this February at the same time of day. It shows two corner captains standing in yellow vests holding walkie-talkies. No one is within 30 feet of them.

"Sometimes dealers will only go 20 feet away," Hilliard said before the evening event. "I see it as a turf war. And some days are better than others. But we're a daily presence now, and it's an end to a time when we couldn't get enough people (volunteers)."

Robinson explains on the Website that Safe Passage monitors avoid "negative street elements."

"It is not our goal to intervene," she writes. "We are a safety presence, and with us here people can focus on us and feel safer on the streets. There is something about seeing the yellow vest, seeing people waving with their walkie-talkies ... we know it has a positive impact."

Because a dope dealer recently got hold of a yellow vest, likely stolen, and was wearing it while selling, Safe Passage has ordered blue replacement vests from Hong Kong, "and not easy to duplicate," Robinson jokes, sensing no one would go to the trouble a second time.

Safe Passage, along with Boeddeler Park, have become the centers for neighborhood safety transformation in the last six months.

Hilliard calls St. Francis Foundation's Causey the "mastermind" behind the safety-first idea for the neighborhood to successfully deal with "decades-old issues." The TL HIP is committing \$1 million this year: \$150,000 to Passage, \$250,000 for Boeddeler Park staffing and programs, \$100,000 to Tenderloin Economic Development Project, \$139,000 to Green Mobile Health Education Kitchen Project — Tenderloinwide classes in eating well — and the rest to be determined.

'WE'D COVER IT'

Before speaking at the fundraiser, Causey told The Extra his group planned for a year before committing the first \$500,000 to the neighborhood and even offered Capt. Cherniss overtime pay if that was needed for Boeddeler Park safety, "and that could be plainclothes officers shooting baskets with youngsters — we'd cover it." But it wasn't needed.

Causey said he had "no quantitative



Preparing for school to let out in the afternoon, Safe Passage corner captain Miryam Aspajo beads out to Tenderloin street corners followed by Kate Robinson, program director, and fellow volunteers Morena Perez and Johnny Sbeeley.

evidence" that the park is safer since opening Dec. 10, but he's certain there's less drug dealing.

The idea was to start in a small geographic area and gradually spread out into the neighborhood, he said. "We're making (Boeddeler) an enlightened place. We have a real shot at making a fundamental change.

"There are a lot of groups around that individually couldn't make the needed changes alone, but by giving them the

resources to do it together, we'll make a big difference."

St. Francis Memorial Hospital has been heavily involved in the neighborhood "for many, many years," Causey told the Safe Passage group. A steady stream of indigent patients to their nearby doorstep costs "millions and millions" of dollars. (St. Francis Hospital gave away almost \$10 million on charity cases in 2011-12, according to the Public Health Department's most recent Charity Care

At Turk and Leavenworth streets, corner captain Yelice Urbina takes up her post at 2:45 p.m., watching over passing children on their way home from school.

Report.) The way to reduce that is to help create a safe and healthy Tenderloin, he said.

"There are 33,000 people in the Tenderloin and 3,500 kids, and they deserve a better life," Causey said. "It will never be a Noe Valley, but nobody wants that. People want to feel safe walking up Leavenworth."

Cherniss later said that the old fortress-like Boeddeler was "an invitation" to drug dealers, but since the makeover it's more open and with so much activity that "it's awkward for criminals" to exploit it. He had no figures to show diminished arrests in and around the park, and wouldn't say what hours two of his officers work there, but he is convinced that drug dealers have shied away and possibly gone "to Turk Street to show an uptick" there.

"It's the hub of positive community togetherness," he said of the park. "It's not necessarily police, it's community. It's ripe for that now. We're all getting more connected and sharing information."

Hilliard, who started in the TL as a Christian Academy grade school teacher, said Boeddeler is "the model" of safety now and will have the biggest impact on the neighborhood.

"I haven't seen anything like it in my 16 years in the Tenderloin," she said. ■



Bushra Al'absi, a teacher at Cross Cultural Family Center — a private preschool and K-4 afterschool program at 259 Turk St. that opened in 1994 — shepherds students through the streets as volunteer Johnny Sbeeley monitors their passage.

Safe Passage dinged — maintenance 'botched'

SRO owner complains about yellow bricks as 'bad graffiti'

By TOM CARTER

The repainting of the TL's Safe Passage yellow brick route picked up a nick when one of its long-time supporters called it a "botched" job done without permission and asked Supervisor Jane Kim's office to find out from the Department of Public Works why it happened and how it can be rectified.

Kathy Looper, who owns the Cadillac Hotel and has supported Safe Passage as a TL Community Benefit District board member, asked in an email to Kim and her assistant why the sidewalk on the Leavenworth side of the hotel was repainted with the super large yellow bricks "without my permission or without any community process for comment. I support Safe Passage but don't appreciate what is rapidly becoming bad graffiti on a public sidewalk."

Looper and her late husband, Leroy — lifelong champions of good works — bought the Cadillac in 1977, turning it into the TL's first supportive housing in an SRO. The hotel will house the soon-to-open ground-floor Tenderloin Museum.

The original "yellow brick road" went down on an 11-block route for schoolchildren in 2012. Its repainting didn't begin until a month ago and isn't finished. Looper included a picture of her referenced sidewalk section showing the badly faded bricks next to a bunch of tighter-spaced, bright yellow bricks.

Looper asked in her email if there shouldn't have been hearings for the job she called "botched, badly maintained and painted," contributing to

the neighborhood's "trashy" label.

Safe Passage Executive Director Dina Hilliard said someone had sent the email to her and she was surprised that Looper didn't contact her about her grievances.

"We have a permit to do this," Hilliard said, "and we want neighborhood consensus on this. We want the property owners to be happy with it. It's meant to be attractive and vibrant for schoolkids. But I agree it doesn't look fantastic in some places."

Hilliard admitted "a lapse in maintenance" that was drawn out when Safe Passage changed fiscal sponsors from the TL CBD to Community Initiatives. Hilliard had been the CBD executive director for several years before leaving it for the Passage job. It was only then that Passage came into bucks big enough to repaint.

Hilliard told The Extra she would talk to Looper, who was firm that she was complaining solely as a property owner, not a CBD board member. Apparently, though, they haven't gotten along for a while.

"Dina and I don't have a talking relationship at all," Looper wrote in an email to The Extra.

Hilliard later sent her an email after hearing from Kim's office that Looper "had concerns" about "the maintenance of the Safe Passage mural" (Safe Passage's term for the bricks). Hilliard offered in an email to her to answer any questions sent to her "in a timely manner."

At the CBD's Public Rights of Way Committee meeting April 9, maintaining the bricks came up, though it wasn't on the agenda. Looper is a member but was absent.

"There was talk about the quality of maintenance, and there were a lot of questions," says Susie McKinnon, CBD interim director. "It was essentially about the condition of the sidewalk murals. There were questions but no answers," McKinnon said it was her task to get those answers from Hilliard and report back to the committee.

Hilliard told The Extra that mainte-



MARK HEDIN

Safe Passage's old bricks, repainted, foster a "trashy" look," complains Kathy Looper, Cadillac Hotel owner.

nance is ongoing. "We budget \$500 for 20 hours a month of repainting by the artist, or if he supervises any volunteers. It goes on block by block." And, like the painting of the Golden Gate Bridge, it is constant.

Looper, responding to Hilliard in an email, said she wasn't sure Hilliard could answer the questions, which were "larger than the Safe Passage bricks," and centered on "How did this happen?" They included her rights as a property owner, what right someone has to paint sidewalks in front of a business and, though it's referred to as public art, is it?

Looper concluded to her: "You should religiously have maintained it to the highest standard." ■

Marjorie Beggs contributed to this report.