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Dedicated Parks and Recreation Director Transforms Department

By Cathy Tyson



Jennifer Russell Photo Cathy Tyson

At 29 years of service and counting, Jennifer Russell, Parks and Recreation Director, is arguably one of the city's longest tenured employees. She must be doing something right. With the rehabilitated Community Center in good shape, class and meeting rooms busy every day of the week, a new multi-sport RINK, Petanque Park and Buckeye Fields - things are going swimmingly. She and an able staff of nine people are responsible for recreation programs, special events, parks and city trails.

After graduating from Acalanes and fresh from San Francisco State with a degree in Parks and Recreation, finding gainful employment in a post Proposition 13 world was a little challenging, "people laughed and told me I'd chosen the wrong career," said Russell.

She's been asked 'how can you possibly stay in a job this long', "It's incredibly

easy to answer because it's never boring and never stagnant - continually changing. When we started there was no Community Center and we only had the little tiny Brook Street Park." What a difference almost three decades make.

Starting out working for Ernie Mariner, Lafayette's first City Manager, in this "no service" city, the prospects of a long term career did not look good.

Her very first job with the City was as a temporary, part-time Summer Recreation Leader where she supervised public swimming, basketball, ping-pong and badminton at Acalanes High School. The Recreation Commission saw a lot of potential in her and convinced the City to hire her as a Commission Aid. In addition to her Commission duties, she single-handedly managed a variety of recreation classes wherever she could find a space - church buildings, school classrooms and even private homes.

The purchase of the Community Center was a big change for Russell. Due to a big decrease in family sizes, school numbers fell dramatically and, the post Proposition 13 budget cuts convinced the school district to close four schools in the late 1970's.

One of these was the old Burton School which sat vacant for six long years with a leaky roof.

"It was amazing when the city bought this building along with the park property across the creek - that was a big leap - I had to become a building manager which meant learning quickly about boilers and roofs and so much more." She continued, "When we came out here - I thought you've got to be kidding me - there's mold growing up the walls, water sogged ceiling tiles piled up on the floors and broken glass behind the boarded up windows."

"My mantra was one room at a time - just focus on one room at a time." One of the first projects she tackled was to knock out the walls of four classrooms to create a multipurpose room with the intention of hosting lots of classes to help offset the remodeling costs.

Currently there's been serious discussion of a new playground, dog park, Calaveras Ridge Trail connection and bike/BMX park. These coupled with existing facilities like the 68-acre Community Park, Buckeye Field, Brook Street Park, Leigh Creekside Park, and the new multi-sport RINK keep Russell plenty busy. Every day the Community Center hosts a wide range of classes from Kindergym to Dog Obedience to Vietnamese Cooking. There's also the soon-to-be completed Master Parks Plan and maintaining the self-sufficiency of the recreation fee classes and implementing the Trails Master Plan. It's no wonder she never gets bored. Russell pays high tribute to the PTR Commissioners who work in partnership with her. "It's like having this amazing talent pool that works for free."

In fact, because she's such a dedicated city employee, this year will be the first time since 1984 she'll be able to take a two week vacation. She deserves one.

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