



AN URBAN OASIS

COMMUNITY GROUPS AND LOCAL AUTHORITY REPRESENTATIVES FROM ALL OVER LONDON GATHERED AT CITY HALL ON 28TH FEBRUARY TO CELEBRATE COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN THE CAPITAL'S PARKS AND GREEN SPACES. **BECKY VOLKER** CONSIDERS THE IMPACT OF THE CONFERENCE AND TAKES A LOOK AT THE FILMS MADE BY COMMUNITY GROUPS AS PART OF THE 'PARKS ON FILM' COMPETITION.

Urban Oasis: Parklife for Londoners was a success for organisers Southwark Council, who put on an impressive event with a meticulous eye for detail, right down to the grass-covered stage complete with real foliage backdrop.

Keynote speaker Tupper Thomas, President of Prospect Park Alliance (PPA), made an inspiring case for the benefits of involving the community in park management, and convincingly argued for parks to be seen as the heart of the community, the glue which holds it together and a catalyst for community regeneration.

PPA was founded in 1987 as a response to the degeneration of Prospect Park, the only park which serves the two million inhabitants of Brooklyn. Since the 1970s, the park had been subject to budget cuts which resulted in a deterioration of both its natural areas and the numbers of park visitors.

The Alliance is a public-private partnership between members of Brooklyn's local community and the City of New York, who have worked together with numerous business partners and private donors to increase the park's usership by 300%, while making critical improvements to its fragile ecosystem and preserving its historical and architectural treasures.

Among the community initiatives that have been formed between the park and the community, one of the highlights has been the establishment of the Brooklyn Academy for Science and the Environment, a high school founded by the PPA and the City of New York Education Department, which uses the park as a teaching resource and focuses on teaching teen development and leadership skills.

Tupper readily admitted that none of this work could have taken place without the input of wealthy Brooklyn philanthropists who had both the time and money to dedicate to turning their park around. Delegates at the conference may not have access to the same resources, but nevertheless, Tupper's engaging description of Prospect Park Alliance's success in involving members >>>>



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<<< of the diverse surrounding communities was inspiring enough to galvanise the audience to want to return to their parks and green spaces and continue their work to involve the local community.

Parks and green space community groups are a growing resource for the UK's parks network. GreenSpace's Community Networking research project found that 4000 parks based groups are currently working throughout the UK. A huge range of skills are harnessed within these groups, and their annual economic value is estimated at between £17m and £35m .

Parks and green space community groups are clearly a major asset, but are politicians and the wider public fully aware of the benefits they can bring? Do community groups publicise their work enough? Isn't there a case for communication toolkits to be developed so that groups, and the local authorities that support them, can promote their work to the public and, importantly, to the agencies and politicians which hold the purse-strings?

As part of the Urban Oasis conference, Southwark Council ran a competition which invited London-based community groups to submit a film about their work. The films were shortlisted by a panel of judges, and the final three shown on the day. The winner was decided by a show of hands from the audience.

The winners were the Friends of Jubilee Park and the Friends of Pymmes Park, from Enfield, North London, who joined forces to produce a delightful film about their Get Walking Get Talking group, which meets every week at Jubilee Park and Pymmes Park. The group, which is run by an Age Concern trainer, provides a welcome opportunity for the elderly members to improve their health and fitness by enjoying a good walk in the park whilst developing a strong social network.

Peter Armstrong, Chair of the Friends of Jubilee Park, told Spaces&Places that the members of the group have really benefited from the friendships they have formed by

taking part in the walks, as well as relishing the opportunity to become film stars for the day. "They jumped at the chance of appearing in the film, as they felt it would be a great way to promote their group. Most of them couldn't wait to get in front of the camera!"

Peter is excited about the potential of the film to promote the work of the group to a wider audience. "A film like this is one of the best ways to get people involved in parks. Enfield Council is planning to show the film to other nascent friends groups in the borough to encourage them to set up similar initiatives." The film was funded by Southwark Council and made by the production company Logistix.

Runners-up included the Brickfields Meadow Action Group in Croydon, for their film about their fundraising work to build a creative play area, which will include the erection of seven totem poles to echo the seven enormous chimneys which existed on the site in its days as a brickworks, and the Friends of Kelsey Park in Bromwich, for their film celebrating what has been achieved on their own site.

The power of film to communicate ideas and messages was further illustrated by a film made by Peckham Youth Animation and Media, which featured young Londoners talking about what parks meant to them. The film, a simple but effective montage of 'talking heads' interspersed with quotes, made by young people about young people, had more power than any printed report or presentation to convey the issues they face when using parks.

Films and new media channels such as websites are extremely useful ways for groups to promote the work that they are doing, both to sector agencies and to the wider public. A wide range of work is being done by dedicated groups to improve parks and green spaces for the whole community, and an effective film that captures the essence of a project will ensure that this vital work does not go unnoticed. ■



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