

PROTECTING OUR PARKS

Some of my earliest memories of Redlands are of romping around Sylvan Park and swimming in its public swimming pool (known locally as "The Plunge"). I recall vividly exploring the historic Zanja that runs through the park with my younger sister and brother.

Fondly, I reflect upon those fun times when I helped my siblings prepare for the rigors and challenges they would face as adults. The Zanja (pronounced by many of us as the "sanky") was one of those wonderful childhood training grounds.

Wet, icky moss in your sister's hair and slimy mudballs applied liberally to your younger brother have been proven to enhance their chances of success later in life. Really, it's true.

Their protests aside, it was clearly my loving and caring attention, as we searched for the elusive "Sylvan Park Speckled Trout," or the "Red-bellied Sanky Snake," that made them successful today.

OK, maybe our parents had something to do with this too. But big brothers are supposed to help their sisters and brothers grow to be brave and strong by administering these kinds of trials. At least that's my story and I'm sticking to it!

As areas where families gather and wonderful childhood memories are formed, Redlands' parks should be some of our most sacred places. As a community, we should honor the contributions of park donors and the local heroes that work tirelessly to maintain them -- people such as Harold Hill (and his many colleagues), who spend many days a week volunteering in Caroline Park, or the folks that comprise the *Friends of Prospect Park*, who, for many years, have served as tremendous advocates for one of our oldest parks.

Redlands has many tremendous attributes that contribute to its reputation as the "Jewel of the Inland Empire." Among them is its system of 14 parks that provide opportunities for people to hike, fish, picnic or otherwise enjoy themselves in peaceful environs.

Like most public places in Redlands, the parks are quite safe. However, there are public safety issues located in and around the parks that must be addressed. Vandalism, transient "urban camping," illegal dumping, drinking and drug use occur periodically in every one of our parks. These activities are frequently difficult to observe from the street and are only observable from within the parks. The Redlands Police Department is charged with maintaining the safety of the parks and is having increasing challenges in doing so. Our parks deserve to be treated as the invaluable assets they are by having substantially more attention paid to their safety.

Over the last few years, the City has been forced to reduce the taxpayer-funded, public safety resources available to the RPD. This has compelled the department to increasingly rely on its *Citizen Volunteer Patrol* (CVP). The CVP is a group of 65 dedicated citizens who volunteer a minimum of 10 hours each month assisting the RPD. Yearly, the members of the CVP typically contribute more than 16,000 volunteer hours.

To enhance the safety of Redlands' parks, the RPD is creating a *Volunteer Park Ranger Program* to function under the auspices of the department's CVP and we are seeking citizens eager to participate in the program.

Many cities have paid, fulltime park rangers who focus on protecting the public's interests in parks and publicly owned open space (i.e. Riverside, Buena Park, Beverly Hills,

Santa Monica, etc.). Redlands' current financial constraints preclude hiring such employees. However, the RPD has a rich history of leveraging its employee resources through the use of volunteers to meet increasing public safety demands and public expectations when budgetary resources are unavailable. This program is an example of how the RPD can fulfill its public safety mission without adding a burden to the City's *General Fund*.

As envisioned, the unarmed Park Rangers will wear distinctive "ranger" uniforms that clearly identify them as volunteer members of the RPD. They will have RPD police radios and be in constant communication with police dispatchers and officers. They will patrol the parks on foot, bicycle, ATV's and, perhaps, even on their own horses (reminiscent of the RPD's *Mounted Posse* that operated in the 1980s). Like members of the CVP, they will be the "eyes and ears" of the Police and Public Works Departments in the parks, reporting criminal activity and park maintenance or safety issues. They will also provide public assistance to people using the parks (i.e. directions, information, basic first aid, etc.). Their training will be similar to that which the members of the CVP are provided.

The program's initial funding needs – met by a generous \$5,000 donation from the Kiwanis Club of Redlands (Noon) – include uniforms, badges, radios, daypacks, miscellaneous equipment and promotional materials. Its sustainability will be ensured through the same mechanisms the RPD uses to maintain its other volunteer programs.

I believe *Volunteer Park Rangers* will help ensure that our parks remain safe and continue to be the priceless community jewels they are today. With a relatively small amount of community support, this vision can become a reality.

The sacred places in our town – such as parks and schools – remain such only if we draw certain "lines in the sand" and say to those who wish to damage them that we will stand for it no longer. We can do this in a variety of ways. Creating opportunities for people to help protect them, as *Volunteer Park Rangers*, is one of them.

If you are interested in participating in the Park Ranger program, or any other volunteer opportunity at the RPD, please feel free to contact me at 909-335-4744 or via e-mail at chief@redlandspolice.org.