

Thinking Big: Middle School Students Make Change Happen

"Creating community, through people, parks, and programs"

City of Tulare

Proud. Tough. Determined. John Pendleton taught middle school students in the Mulcahy community that a life governed by these words would earn rewards. "I wanted them to know that, if you exhibit dignity, class, poise, and respect, people will listen to you, no matter where you happen to live."

Mulcahy Middle School students absorbed Pendleton's coaching like young sponges, and they made change happen in their west-side neighborhood in the small Central Valley town of Tulare. This spring, the students and staff members of the Mulcahy Middle School, Tulare School District, and the City of Tulare celebrated the opening of a new 11-acre community park where once only a vacant lot existed. Pendleton recalls, "Everyone called the area 'the park,' but according to some it was more like 'a field of goat trails.'"

The story of how the community and students of Tulare's Mulcahy neighborhood got their park is a classic "feel good" tale.

Once upon a time, the Mulcahy neighborhood had no sidewalks. Working in cooperation with the City's Redevelopment Agency and through the use of the Safe Routes to School national funding program, members of the Mulcahy Middle School community, along with those of neighboring Roosevelt Elementary School, mobilized to secure support. When City Council members attended the National Walk to School Day hosted by Mulcahy and Roosevelt Schools, some of the Mulcahy students accompanied them to describe how the lack of sidewalks impacted their activities and those of the neighborhood. Pendleton recalls. "This was a perfect opportunity for the kids to learn that making eye contact and shaking hands when they meet, and being courteous, dignified, and respectful will pay off in spades." The Mulcahy neighborhood soon had sidewalks.

With the sidewalk project came word of a possible opportunity to secure state grant funds to build a "tot-lot" play area at the preschool next to Mulcahy. Pendleton jumped on the opportunity, and suggested transforming the playing fields area behind Mulcahy into a community park at the same time.

At first, stakeholders were skeptical. Where would the money come from? "The project would take a lot of work and money," explains Pendleton. "For example, the Mulcahy Middle School property, including the proposed park site, shared a water main with nearby Roosevelt Elementary School. Pendleton chuckles as he recalls, "When the Mulcahy sprinklers went on, the water pressure dropped at Roosevelt."

Pendleton successfully convinced the students of Mulcahy Middle School that no one would heed their pleas for a park until their state test scores improved, and they were able to show that they are positive and productive members of the community. They did. Test scores improved by 100 points over a period of just 3 years. And people noticed. In fact, community and agency cooperation became so instrumental in the concept and design phases of the project, Pendleton considers the Mulcahy Park "a private sector's crowning achievement in working with the public."

"The neighborhood rallied around us, joining in the final State interview for the project at 2 O'clock in the afternoon in 100-degree heat. One of our school community families, the Pardos, even set up pop-up tents for shade." At the meeting, park proponents spoke to the heart of the problem. Mulcahy Middle School and the surrounding neighborhood deserved a park where families could gather, and children could play safely. Students of Mulcahy crafted conceptual drawings of their visions for the park. Parents met to discuss their expectations and hopes for an improved neighborhood culture.

The 10-acre Mulcahy Park became a reality in 2011 through the joint efforts of the City, the Tulare City School District, the students and staff members of Mulcahy and Roosevelt Schools, and residents of the

neighborhood, along with Proposition 84 Statewide Park Program funding. As civil design consultant for the project, Quad Knopf provided design, civil engineering, project management, construction administration, utility coordination, landscape architecture, and public outreach services.

Pendleton attributes former Mulcahy Middle School Vice Principal, Anthony Felix (now Principal at Tulare's Garden School), and Ira Porchia, Principal of Roosevelt Elementary School, with much of the effort required to promote the park concept. "John Beck, Superintendent of Schools, and Luis Castellanoz (Superintendent, Tulare City Schools) also get a lot of credit," he says. Castellanoz selected Pendleton to act as a liaison in the City process that led to the selection of Quad Knopf as the design firm, and to assist the project design team in remaining focused on the community's wish list for the park. "My job was to help the designers make the original vision a reality," he says proudly. "Mark Thompson (Mulcahy Vice Principal and newly-named Principal), and Terri Martindale (Mulcahy's current Principal) are doing a superb job of maintaining that vision, and caring for the park."

John Pendleton was a teacher and later Principal of Mulcahy Middle School for 22 years, leaving shortly before the park was completed. Currently, he is Principal of Tulare's Wilson Elementary School. "What's nice is that the two schools share some geographic boundaries, meaning I'm still somewhat connected with Mulcahy Middle School, and I can still enjoy the change that the park affected." Before the park, neighborhood kids used to play in the playing fields sprinklers. "I told parents, as well as the designers, the park has to have splash pads!"

Splash pads? Done--along with a host of other amenities the community asked for.

"All through the development and into the construction process, the community has been encouraged to take ownership in the park," says Mike Ratajski, Senior Project Manager for Quad Knopf. "About 100 students were invited to make a lasting impression by imprinting their hands in a concrete band that surrounds the public plaza, which is front and center to the park--a gateway to most of the park's amenities." Among those amenities are football/soccer fields, softball/little league diamonds, restroom facilities, picnic pavilions and picnic areas, tot and pre-teen playgrounds, more than 3,000 linear feet of trails, and benches throughout. Dan Garver, Senior Landscape Architect with Quad Knopf, incorporated a number of sustainable design features into the park plan, including an irrigation system with a "smart" feature to limit water use; drought tolerant and native landscaping, and high efficiency restroom fixtures.

Mulcahy Park represents change in a good way. As Pendleton sees it, when the members of the school community and the students found that their respectful requests, along with cooperation and participation, earned sidewalks, they had truly become active partners in improving their neighborhood and city. "The park represents a wonderful example of how cities, school districts, and the private sector can work together to improve a community's quality of life."

The community celebrated Mulcahy Park's official opening on May 3, 2013, with a grand opening ceremony in the morning and a community event later in the day.

Mulcahy Middle School

Named after longtime Tulare educator, Mrs. Alice G. Mulcahy, Mulcahy Middle School is dedicated to the principles of hard work, honesty, pride, community service, and determination. Since its opening in 1958, the school has provided students with a comprehensive educational experience designed to meet the challenges of higher education and future career choices.

As one of four middle schools in Tulare, Mulcahy, with a population of 660, serves fifth through eighth grade students. Rich in its ethnic diversity and strong in school community pride, the Mulcahy Middle

School staff and student body are dedicated in their pursuit of excellence in education. The mission of Mulcahy Middle School is to prepare all students for high school and post secondary education through a standards-based academic program that promotes strong ethical character, critical thinking skills, and emotional and physical well being.

*From: Tulare School District/Mulcahy Middle School
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