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Arts group's eclectic work

By Marty Clear, Times Correspondent
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As part of the Seeds for the Springs project, USF student volunteers create a plant and vegetable garden Saturday at the home of Sulphur Springs resident Owen Kitchen.



[KAINAZ AMARIA | Times]

SULPHUR SPRINGS — The community is looking a little prettier these days, and neighbors have come to know each other a little better thanks to an arts organization that strives to enhance the quality of life in one of Tampa's poorest areas.

Community Stepping Stones planted gardens last week in the front yards of two nearby homeowners — at no cost. The group then hosted a picnic for the entire neighborhood.

"At the peak there were maybe 150 people there," said Ed Ross, a long-time local artist and the nonprofit organization's founder. "Afterwards, people said they had talked to their neighbors for the first time — people they'd been living next to for years."

Ross, who has lived in Sulphur Springs since 1990, started Community Stepping Stones five years ago. He believed art could enhance the community and help bring people together.

"I knocked on doors, and I talked to the kids in the street," Ross said. "It took off right away because they were looking for something to do."

The organization offered free art classes for young people out of a storefront on Bird Street. Ross, with assistance from students in a community arts course that he teaches at the University of South Florida, developed art projects for

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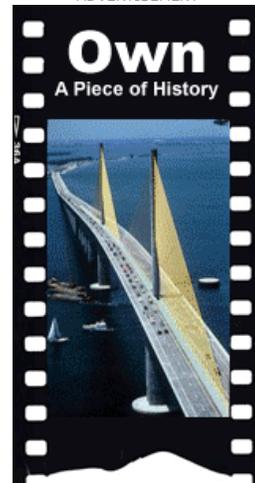


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the kids from another location, a place on Mulberry Drive known as the Art House.

What began as a creative and free place for kids to hang out after school turned into a neighborhood necessity. Kids immediately flocked to the Art House.

The youth helped to make the site welcoming by cleaning up piles of trash 7 feet high in a lot next door.

Teen volunteers for Community Stones also painted murals on the outside walls of the racquetball courts at nearby Rowlett Park.

They went around asking neighbors how life in Sulphur Springs could be improved.

"We heard about crime and the things you'd expect," Ross said. "But the one thing we kept hearing from everybody was that they wished there was more communication, that neighbors would talk to each other more about what's going on in the neighborhood."

That's not an easy thing to do in this highly transient area. (According to the group's Web site, communitysteppingstones.net, about a third of the students who start the year at Sulphur Springs Elementary School transfer to another school by year's end.)

As a first step, Ross and the kids designed and built a replica of the Sulphur Springs Tower that they hope will be used for a community message center. It's a work-in-progress, though. The miniature tower, surrounded by a wall meant to represent the old Sulphur Springs Arcade, has been vandalized several times and neighbors have yet to use it. The message center sits in River Cove Park, along the river on Mulberry Drive.

With their newest project, Seeds for the Springs, volunteers are planting gardens, such as the two they planted last week at homes down the street from the Art House.

Other residents have expressed interest in being part of the program. "We'll plant vegetables for food, herbs for flavor, or what I call food for the soul — ornamentals," Ross said. "In return, we get a promise that people will keep the area around their property clean."

In the coming weeks, Community Stepping Stones plans to offer free art classes for adults. Also, another neighborhood picnic is tentatively scheduled for the end of the summer.

But the economy has hit Community Stepping Stones at least as hard as it has hit everyone else. The group has had financial support from the USF School of Art and Arts Education and other corporations and governmental agencies. Since those organizations are feeling a monetary squeeze, they can't afford to be so generous.

"Right now," Ross said, "the money has pretty much dried up."

Still, he hopes the work will go on.

[KAINAZ AMARIA | Times]

Lakeema Matthew, 19, helps her sister Janecia, 6, spray paint a leaf onto a bench created by the group Community Stepping Stones. "I started off as a student," says Lakeema, who now volunteers with the organization. "Whenever I have the chance I bring her [Janecia] out here."

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For more information about Community Stepping Stones, go to the group's Web site at

communitysteppingstones.net.

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