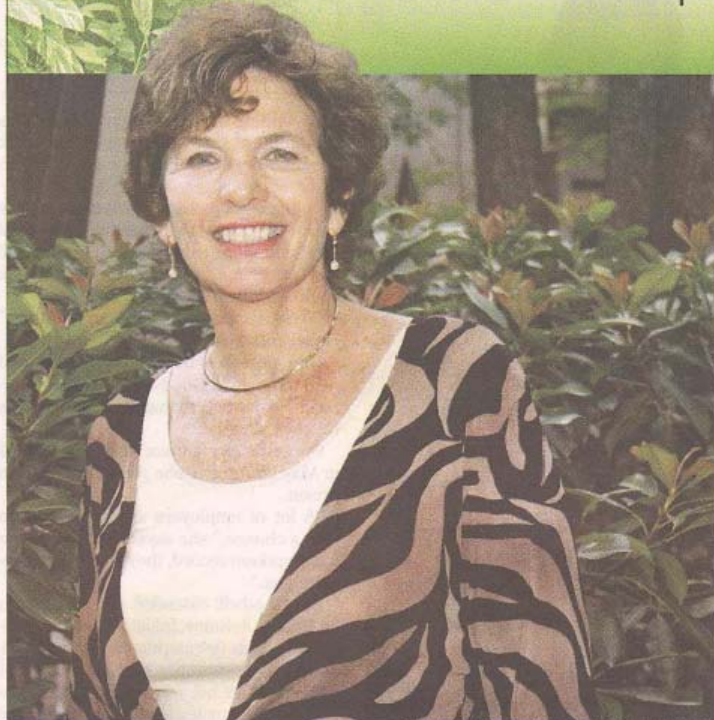


Wildcard: Community Outreach



CATHERINE DOMINGUEZ / SAN ANTONIO BUSINESS JOURNAL

Green Spaces Executive Director Julie Koppenheffer says the community gardens project connects people.

BY SUSIE PHILLIPS GONZALEZ

On the campaign trail with her husband when he was running for mayor in 2005, Linda Hardberger noticed a number of empty lots that made neighborhoods look shabby. She also observed another trend — San Antonians like to name their section of town to create a community identity that promotes bonding.

With an interest in community organizing, Hardberger searched for a vehicle to put the “neighbor” back in neighborhoods. She began brainstorming with Julie Koppenheffer, who had just been named executive director of Green Spaces Alliance of South Texas and had an interest in starting community gardens.

“The folks at Green Spaces were looking for different ways to impact the community. We thought (the community garden program) was a good fit,” Hardberger says.

Today, Green Spaces has helped develop 22 community gardens that reflect the wishes of San Antonio neighborhoods. Koppenheffer says the types of gardens run the gamut: meditation gardens, vegetable gardens, gardens filled with native plants, mixed gardens.

“Despite the drought, they have kept going,” she says. “Community gardens are built and maintained by the community. The site is chosen by the community, and the effort is a labor of love by the community.” Best of all, the gardens are given a name that defines the neighborhood and functions as a source of community pride.

Fertile ground

Community gardens are only one component of the mission of Green Spaces Alliance. The non-profit has two other primary programs, land preservation and

conservation and the Picture Your World campaign which lets children learn about the need to protect their world by photographing it. For its comprehensive work, Green Spaces Alliance has been named a Community Outreach winner in the San Antonio Business Journal’s Going Green competition.

Koppenheffer notes that community gardens attract volunteers “in droves,” including those from the neighborhood, corporations, and gardeners willing to share their expertise. “It’s a program that engages thousands of people and is something people want to do and contribute to in a whole-hearted way,” she says. The organization has a full-time community gardens coordinator, Angela Hartzell, who takes soil samples and provides a watering schedule, among other tasks.

Before launching the program, Koppenheffer and Hardberger went to Houston to learn about the Bayou City’s Urban Harvest Program. Returning home, they sought funding and encountered The Kronkosky Foundation, which wanted an organization to establish playgrounds at the grassroots level. “That was a good idea, and we were happy to do that, but we would prefer to ask the neighborhood,” Hardberger recalls.

Although there was overwhelming support for community gardens, some areas have gardens combined with playgrounds. The result has been great for diabetics who grow vegetables to help manage their condition. What’s more, the gardens are an outlet for children who might not otherwise spend much time outdoors, says Hardberger, now a member of the Green Spaces board. In some cases, children have learned about gardening from their grandparents.

Green Spaces Alliance of South Texas

Description: Local land trust dedicated to keeping So. Texas green

Web site: <http://greenspacesalliance.org>

Green fact: The trust has preserved 35,000 acres of its 125,000-acre goal.

“This has been a great program. We’re basically a connector between the community and those who want to help,” Hardberger says.

Growing partnerships

Janet Grojean, director of corporate relations and community outreach with Texas Public Radio, also is an advocate of the community gardens program. Her radio station partnered with Green Spaces in August to sponsor an event that drew more than 500 people to the Pearl Stable. At the gathering, people were able to glean harvest hints and tips on buying local produce and planting abundant backyard and community gardens, Grojean says.

Another way of meeting the goal of a greener community is through the lens — the camera lens — of a child. Koppenheffer says the Picture Your World initiative is for children ages 8 to 18 who might not have the opportunity to not only get out into nature but also to learn photography skills.

In the last two years, the Boeing Corp. has provided funds for cameras for students at Douglas Academy in the San Antonio Independent School District and at Henry B. Gonzalez Elementary in the Edgewood School District. “They were thrilled to be part of the program,” Koppenheffer says.

As part of her focus on land

preservation, Koppenheffer, a lawyer by training, works to create partnerships with landowners who pledge to curtail development and opt for conservation. This practice requires property owners to enter into an agreement with an agency such as Green Spaces, which holds the land in a legal trust with certain restrictions. “People can farm and ranch their land. They can hunt and fish it, use it for recreation, and they can even sell it, but the covenants transfer with the sale,” Koppenheffer says, adding that such agreements require building relationships with local landowners. “We work with them by providing educational programs and being here as a resource,” she says in between meetings and telephone conversations to organize a farm and ranch forum in February. Koppenheffer wants to bring in a range of experts to discuss preservation, conservation easements and other ways landowners can enhance their land while keeping it.

Preserving the future

The goal of Green Spaces Alliance — formerly known as Bexar Land Trust but changed its name in 2008 to make clear it is not a government agency — is to preserve about 125,000 acres from development in the next five years in Bexar, Uvalde and Medina counties. The group secured preservation agreements for about 20,000 acres in 2008 and so far this year has added nearly 15,000 acres. “But we still have a lot of acreage to go,” Koppenheffer says.

A major source of funding for these agreements is a voter-approved Edwards Aquifer protection program, whose funding cycle ends this year. “We need to find other sources of funds,” she adds.

Grojean, one of Koppenheffer’s biggest fans, is optimistic.

“Julie is tremendously energetic, focused and committed to the greening of our community — whether its purpose is to create a community garden, save or enhance an outdoor public space or to appreciate the beauty of Texas’ nature-escape,” Grojean says. “She represents an important puzzle piece of the local environmental picture.”

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COURTESY OF GREEN SPACES ALLIANCE OF SOUTH TEXAS

A Green Spaces project: Community gardens of St. Therèse at Basilica of the National Shrine of Little Flower