



Cyr Miller: Pickleweed enjoys new relevance

By Cyr Miller

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SAN RAFAEL'S Pickleweed Park Community Center has been radically transformed. The Pickleweed Center miraculously changed from an outdated, 12,000-square-foot, blue-gray box into a modern, 24,000-square-foot celebration of many boxes covered in life-breathing shades of green.

With an \$8 million budget from sources as varied as the state, the Bernard Osher Foundation, the Marin Community Foundation, the San Rafael Redevelopment Agency, businesses, service clubs, individuals and families, a revitalized community center and library has emerged from the marshes.

What is Pickleweed? Its unique name is an apt description of its function.

Pickleweed is known in the scientific world as a halophytic, commonly described as a salt loving plant. At first glance, the pickleweed plant seems to have no leaves; when one looks more closely, its stem actually is surrounded with them. Pickleweed Park Community Center acts as the stem holding the leaves of a flourishing multicultural neighborhood with roots extended into the greater city of San Rafael.

Much like its namesake, first glances of the Pickleweed Park Community Center can be misleading. The modern new structure might appear to be a large after-school center. Although

Pickleweed Center includes youth recreation activities, like the plant, this new facility has many leaves and reaches out to a much larger audience.

Ensnconced in Central San Rafael, the Canal neighborhood is home to more than 11,000 people, including 4,000 children under the age of 18.

The neighborhood's 3,500 households occupy apartment buildings, town houses and expensive single-family homes in the two-square-mile residential/business area that is bordered by the San Francisco Bay, the San Rafael Canal and Highway 101.

The Canal neighborhood is California's most culturally diverse community immediately north of the Golden Gate Bridge. It is this neighborhood that USA Today describes as a "... new mosaic built in suburbia."

Some residents of other neighborhoods have asked, "Why spend so much money on one community center, geared toward one neighborhood?" The singular purpose of the center answers that very question.

The new Pickleweed Park center was developed to provide a children's playground, child-care center, expanded grass playing fields, auditorium, kitchen, gymnasium, classrooms, art room, technology center and the city's only branch library. From festivals to English-learning and citizen education, from after-school tutorials to youth and adult soccer leagues, from volleyball and basketball to creative art activities, from senior programs to bridge classes, from teen groups to kids club, from community technology opportunities to full library services, Pickleweed Community Center bustles with activities for the rainbow spectrum of people and ages that are so much a part of the new San Rafael.

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On any given day, within the center and on its fields, groups as diverse as Whistlestop, Marin Arts Council, American Red Cross, YMCA, Canal Youth Soccer Academy, Bahia School, federal Women, Infants, and Children nutrition programs, Marin Academy Crossroads Youth Mentoring Program, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, Canal Alliance Community Technology Group and English as a second language programs, Vietnam American Friendship Group, Mayan/ Yucateca Association, Mexican and Central American Mobil Consulates are meeting, hosting classes and offering services.

Cyr Miller is a member of the San Rafael City Council.

Soccer leagues and baseball teams battle on the fields; volleyball and basketball games excite the gymnasium, while high school juniors are tutored for college. The tiny library has been updated and upgraded, leaving visitors like local resident Isabel Allende to be "impressed by what I have witnessed ... within the walls of a vibrant community building."

More than 100,000 annual visitors to this central address for community life show the successful revitalization of this remarkable community center in the diverse, polyglot Canal neighborhood.

What is Pickleweed?

It is a marsh plant that symbolizes a dynamic community center in which people are empowered to collectively remember their past, share their diversity, understand their present and develop their future.

What is Pickleweed? To reference The Earth Charter, Pickleweed is a special place where families, adults, youth and children from throughout the world, Marin County, the city of San Rafael, and the Canal neighborhood can gather " to guarantee every human right and fundamental freedom and to provide everyone an opportunity to realize his or her full potential."

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