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Neighbors Unite to Help Keep Fountain Flowing By MATTHEW ARTZ



For several of her nearly 20 years in Berkeley Sara Holmes didn't know there was ever a fountain at the Arlington Traffic Circle. But now that it's back, she can't take her eyes off of it.

All year long, Holmes frequently descends to the underground control room to clean filters, treads through knee-high pools of water to change light bulbs and plugs away for hours at graffiti using nothing but a toothbrush to make sure the centerpiece of her neighborhood looks as good as it did when neighbors brought it back to life nine years ago.

"For a long time I couldn't spin around the circle without looking for something to fix," said Holmes, who lives a few blocks from the fountain.

In a time of declining city services, the retired airline sales representative has become the guardian angel for Berkeley's only working public fountain.

"Sara and her crew have just been an incredibly wonderful resource for the city," said Deputy City Manager Lisa Caronna. "They do all the little stuff that we never get the time to do."

Holmes and her husband Harvard first took up the fountain's cause as part of a neighborhood drive in 1993 to restore the traffic circle at Marin Avenue to its past glory. First built in 1911 as the centerpiece of the fledgling Northbrae neighborhood, the circle's fountain and its signature concrete bear cubs, which more than a few neighbors had mistaken for rats, came crashing down in 1958 underneath a run-away truck.

For years the traffic circle was home to juniper scrubs, until 1996 when neighbors under the banner of Friends of the Fountain and Walk raised over \$100,000 to install a replica fountain.

"After the dedication, everyone kind of went back to their lives except me," said Holmes.

As a member of community group, Holmes drew up the procedures for maintaining the fountain and had the most thorough knowledge about how it worked. She also assumed responsibility of recruiting a loyal band of about a dozen volunteers that have come out on the first Saturday of every month to landscape the circle and surrounding grounds, including the nearby Fountain Walk.

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"To me it wasn't about the fountain. I wanted to do something to make me feel like I was contributing to the neighborhood," she said.

For Malcolm Potts, who recently celebrated his 70th birthday at the fountain with fellow volunteers, fountain upkeep has drawn him closer to his neighbors. "This is spontaneous social combustion," he said. "There are few things we do in the modern world where we can come together as neighbors and improve our community."

Last Saturday was the first day on the job for Larry Miller, who recently bought a home near the fountain after marveling at it while visiting his daughter at UC Berkeley.

"I was never especially driven to fountains, but there's something about this one that really attracted me to the area," he said. "At first I thought, 'Wow, the City of Berkeley keeps this up,' but now I know better."

Holmes works closely with the city on upkeep of the circle and commends city employees for their work. City workers landscape the grass around the fountain and perform more technical maintenance jobs. But, as the city has had to scale back services to balance budgets, Holmes has started to do more of the dirty work herself.

If the fountain were left to the city's maintenance schedule, Holmes said, light bulbs would go unreplaced, graffiti would stain the circle and algae would reduce the fountain to a trickle.

"We have a certain standard in this neighborhood that we like to keep up," she said.

Holmes once took it upon herself to resurface the circle bench with a wire brush after finding that people had etched their names in it. She also keeps a concrete mixture identical to the one used for the fountain for touch up work. Her last job came four years ago, she said, when a VW Bug spun out of control and clipped the fountain.

In her battle against graffiti vandals, Holmes has formed an alliance with SBC, whose green telephone utility box at the circle is a frequent target.

"The phone company gives her spray paint to match the color of the box," Harvard Holmes said.

"They deliver it to my door," Sara chimed in. When it comes to tagging the porous fountain, Holmes' tools are a toothbrush, some "globby" graffiti remover and plenty of sweat.

Although the sculpture is coated with an anti graffiti seal, she said, "It's a crapshoot whether it comes out or not."

During the summer months, Holmes said she and her husband travel to the underground control room several times a week to keep filters free of algae that clog the flow of water. For years, Holmes would jump down into the four foot pit and climb back up, but after she hurt herself, her husband Harvard, an engineer, built a subterranean staircase.

Holmes' hard work has won her the loyalty of her once-a-month helpers. "If anyone else called me to work on a Saturday morning I'd probably find an excuse not to come," said Bob Young.

"Sara is so faithful," said Paddy Wolf, an 81-year-old Englishwoman, pulling weeds up from a traffic median. "If it wasn't for her this place would just be full of graffiti."

In return, Holmes throws her fellow volunteers an annual year-end party. At last year's party she gave each volunteer a fountain magnet.

Holmes said keeping up the fountain always offers new problems to solve. Recently two trucks knocked out pillars that surround the circle and a pump problem has left the fountain pool covered with worms.

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Still, Holmes isn't about to beg off her duties.

"I know there are so many people who appreciate the fountain as much as I do," she said. "When someone tells me how much it means to them, that's what keeps me going. Otherwise, it's brutal."

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