

New Park Could Have a Ripple Effect on Waterway

Valleyheart Greenway in Studio City is part of a wider effort to revitalize L.A.'s natural heritage.

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A 14-foot-tall steel toad marks the entrance to Valleyheart Greenway, a Studio City park that celebrates the Los Angeles River.

If a toad that size could croak, its ribbet would rattle the eucalyptus trees and scare the actors dining with their agents on nearby Ventura Boulevard.

Instead, the giant green toad silently invites visitors to imagine the river as it once was — before it was lined with concrete — and as it might be again. The toad squats among giant steel cattails, above a stretch of river in which living frogs or toads are as rare as tigers.

"People have a funny relationship with the river," says Melanie Winter, founder and director of The River Project. "People are used to not looking at it."

A nonprofit organization dedicated to improving local communities through restoration of the rivers in Los Angeles County, Winter's group led the coalition that created the streamside park, dedicated in June.

Formerly executive director of Friends of the Los Angeles River, Winter is not one of those who avert their eyes, even when an upended grocery cart lies on the river bottom. In fact, she says, "I've canoed the whole river," all 52 miles of it, in the summer.

Three years in the making, the park is a refuge with a sober subtext — a place for visitors to stroll past newly planted native trees but also a reminder of life forms that have all but disappeared in increasingly urbanized Southern California.

"We've lost 98% of our riparian habitat in Los Angeles," says Winter, citing steelhead trout and other species that once splashed in local waters.

The park winds a bit more than a quarter of a mile along the river and Valleyheart Drive, between Laurel Canyon Boulevard and Radford Avenue, near the CBS studios. Partners in the project included the California Coastal Conservancy, the county's Department of Public Works, area residents and Carpenter Avenue Elementary School, which is three blocks from the site.

The conservancy provided about \$70,000 for design and other initial costs. The county paid the \$800,000 cost of construction.

Carpenter Avenue grade-schoolers chose the amenities and helped shape the park in other ways, says Winter. They didn't want an ugly fence, so a green steel one was installed.

"They wanted it to be a story fence that told the story of the river," Winter says, so the fence will eventually feature panels showing native plants and animals that once thrived there, as well as depictions of people swimming in the river, an extinct activity.

In the planning process, the river became an essential part of the children's education. They learned

that the city was built along the river because city founders were struck by its beauty and utility.

Second-graders read books about park guru Frederick Law Olmstead, habitat destruction and Native Americans and their canoes.

And the students were asked to observe who used the area near the river and, thus, who would be the "stakeholders" for a streamside park. Their list included people with business at CBS studios, joggers who emerged from a nearby gym, and local homeowners, renters and the homeless. One child put "a coyote family" on the list.

Michael Harris, then in fifth grade, thought the park should have a giant toad gate. His drawing was given to Sherman Oaks artist Lahni Baruck, who designed the finished structure.

"I have friends who are only a little older than myself who remember going down there and catching frogs," says Baruck, 59, who grew up in Studio City.

Baruck, who also designed the park's butterfly bench, applauds the work that Winter and others are doing to restore the river and enhance adjacent communities.

Reclaiming our natural heritage, Baruck says, "is so essential to our living fully integrated, healthy lives."

Winter says that involvement with the river has changed many of the children who helped create the park: "At least one child has decided he's going to become an environmental engineer."

Charlie Ellis, who was a fifth-grader when he designed the park's rattlesnake wall, is now in high school. He is the student coordinator for The River Project's new program called Native River Gardeners that will maintain the indigenous plantings along the stream.

Learning about the river, Winter says, created a group of "children with a fierce sense of place and a fierce determination to protect what's left and to bring back as much as we can."

She hopes that the Valleyheart Greenway will serve as a template for other projects along local waters, projects that will eventually create armies of people determined to save the world one river at a time. And Winter believes the day will come when the concrete will be removed and the Los Angeles River will run freely again.

Meanwhile, Angelenos feed their dreams of Eden where they can.

Winter remembers when the greenway creators planted the first of 12 native trees along the south bank of the river.

That same day, a man emerged from his apartment across from the park, sat under a spindly, newly planted sycamore and began to play his ukulele.

Says Winter, with a smile, "If you plant it, they will come" — even if the toads are made of steel and the river lined with concrete.



GARY FRIEDMAN *Los Angeles Times*

RIVER FRIEND: *Melanie Winter, founder and director of the River Project, involved the community and neighborhood schoolchildren in the planning of Valleyheart Greenway. A fifth-grader conceived the idea for the toad entry gate to the streamside park, which was dedicated in June, and a Sherman Oaks artist designed the end result.*