News
EarthBeat



The former Jefferson Boulevard drill site in Los Angeles. (Photo courtesy of Richard Parks)

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For more than 30 years, Richard Parks and his neighbors have been trying to make their South Los Angeles neighborhood a little more like heaven.

Through the power of friendship, prayer and cheerful determination, they've run tutoring programs for kids, closed a crime-ridden liquor store that was later replaced by a community market and faced down a major oil company to shutter a nearly 60-year-old drill site in the middle of the neighborhood.

Now they hope, with help from the state of California and community partners, to build a community park and affordable housing on the former drill site, which closed in 2018 after years of community pressure.

"God is giving us beauty for ashes," said Parks, president of Redeemer Community Partnership, quoting the biblical prophet Isaiah.

Last month, the Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust closed on a $10 million purchase of the 1.86-acre site, once home to 36 wells, on Jefferson Boulevard from Sentinel Peak Resources.

Almost as soon as the site was shut down, the neighborhood went to work on making plans for the future. Parks and his neighbors worried the site would be bought up by a for-profit developer instead of becoming a community asset. After a series of community meetings, where residents expressed their hopes for a park and affordable housing on the site, they went looking for partners to make those hopes a reality.

One of the first people they reached out to was Tori Kjer, executive director of the LA Neighborhood Land Trust, which has been developing small community parks around the city since 2002. With so few undeveloped properties in LA, places like the former Jefferson drill site offer a rare opportunity, said Kjer.




Community members demonstrate against the Jefferson Boulevard drill site in Los Angeles in 2017. (Photo courtesy of Richard Parks)

Reclaiming a former industrial site requires costly cleanup on top of the purchase price, she told Religion News Service. Developing the site will take several years and a lot of effort from all the partners involved.

Kjer said a team of partners has already been at work behind the scenes for years, including Redeemer, the Land Trust, their real estate broker and a squad of lawyers. They also got help from California Assemblymember Reggie Jones-Sawyer, who got a $10 million grant for the purchase approved by the state Legislature.

"It was everyone rolling up their sleeves to pull it over the finish line," she said. "We are very grateful."

Parks said having a partner like the Land Trust was essential. For nearly a decade, community groups like Redeemer had worked with a coalition called STAND-LA that is working to shut down oil wells citywide. Last December, the LA City Council

banned new oil wells in the city and called for all existing wells to be shut down over the next 20 years, in large part due to health concerns about fossil fuel wells so close to residents. The Los Angeles Times reported in 2022 that the city has more than 5,000 oil and gas wells.

After all the pressure to shut down the Jefferson site, Parks said it was unlikely Sentinel Peak, the former owner, would have wanted to work with neighbors to sell them the site. The Land Trust, which was not involved in the protest, wouldn't face the same reluctance.

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Parks said the campaign to shut down the Jefferson site, which is near a neighborhood school and so close to the nearest house that you could reach out the window and touch the wall surrounding the site, had long felt like a David versus Goliath battle, pitting local residents against a multibillion-dollar corporation.

For inspiration, he often thought of a familiar saying of Jesus about the power of the smallest prayers.

"You think about Jesus' words that if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move,' and it will move," Parks said. "There's this oil company that just happened to be named Sentinel Peak Resources, that's now moved out of the neighborhood. To see God so generously answer those prayers is a reminder that the world and everything in it belongs to the Lord."

Those small, steady prayers have helped sustain Parks since the 1990s, when he and some college friends moved into the Exposition Park neighborhood near the University of Southern California. They hoped to get to know their neighbors, do some tutoring and then see what happened.

The idea was to take seriously the commandment to love your neighbors by trying to love the people who lived on their block.

Three decades later, Parks and his family are still there. After years of working at USC, he left the university to run Redeemer Community Partnership, a faith-based nonprofit focused on making life better in the neighborhood. He and his family are also part of Redeemer Community Church, a small local congregation.




Richard Parks, from left, Tori Kjer and Lori Gay at the former Jefferson Boulevard drill site in Los Angeles. (Photo courtesy of Richard Parks)

A remarkably cheerful and persistent man, Parks said he's been grateful for all that's happening in the neighborhood. He hopes the redevelopment of the drill site is the start of a new chapter in the life of the community.

The next steps for the Jefferson drill site project will include applying for funding from California's Department of Toxic Substances Control to clean up the site as well as applying for state funds for the new park and the planned community center.

Parks is also working with Neighborhood Housing Services of Los Angeles County to develop affordable housing on the parts of the property where there were no wells. Lori Gay, president of NHS, said she's known Parks and the work of Redeemer, where her husband is on the board, for years.

Gay said that Parks first approached her about the Jefferson site a few years ago and she's been watching as the project progresses. Gay, the daughter of a minister, said faith-based groups can play an essential role in addressing the issue of affordable housing.

She said Parks and the neighbors around the drill site have a tenacity that helped make the drill site redevelopment project a reality. She recalled how, when Parks prayed for the project recently, he recited a slightly modified version of the Lord's Prayer.

Rather than praying that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven, Parks prayed that God's will be done "in the neighborhood as it is in heaven."

"I've never heard that before," said Gay.

Parks said praying about God's will being done on earth can sound overwhelming. It can also be hard to put into action. But the neighborhood is a place where he can make changes.

"When we think about the little piece of earth that God has entrusted to our care, then when we pray, maybe it will be done in the neighborhood as it is in heaven," Parks said.