

# ESSAY FIVE

BY Alina Bokde

## The **POWER** of Place: Linking Health and Parks in South Los Angeles

Find research at [www.tpl.org/research/parks/economic-health-benefits.html](http://www.tpl.org/research/parks/economic-health-benefits.html).



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**I**n the 1920s, Florencia Gonzales came from Mexico to the United States in search of a better life. She settled in the Watts neighborhood of South Los Angeles, planted some avocado trees, and raised a flock of chickens in the backyard. A little bell attached to the front gate alerted her when neighbors came calling for eggs, avocados or stalks of her homegrown sugar cane.

Nearly a century later, Florencia's granddaughter Mary Romero is raising her family just blocks away from the original Gonzales homestead. For all intents

and purposes, however, it's an entirely different world. The population of South Los Angeles has ballooned to 800,000 people. Thirteen percent of the residents are unemployed, and one in three families lives below the federal poverty line. Open space, once abundant, is now a precious commodity. Not surprisingly, these factors directly impact community health. The highest rates of obesity, morbidity and mortality in all of Los Angeles County are found right here in South LA.

At the Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust (the Land Trust), we are committed to improving local health outcomes by creating parks, community gardens and innovative programming in underserved areas. In December 2012, one of our signature projects, the Fremont Wellness Center & Community Garden, will be launched. This unique and innovative partnership between the Land Trust, the University Muslim Medical Association (UMMA) and the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) tackles multiple urban challenges in a collaborative fashion, thereby altering the landscape that perpetuates the spiral of poverty and poor health outcomes for our community members.

### Focusing on Fremont High School

The John C. Fremont High School in South Los Angeles has historically been one of the lowest performing high schools in LAUSD. Of its 2,600 students, 80% are low income and one-third drop out before graduation. Students face a host of chronic health problems, the treatment of which is hampered by a lack of insurance. Since 2000, five South LA emergency rooms and hospitals have closed, leaving only one full-scale emergency



**Left:** Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust recently ran a Gardening Apprenticeship Program, a 12-week course for middle and high school students near Fremont. **Below:** A rendering of the plans for Fremont Wellness Center & Community Garden.



room/trauma center to serve all the residents in this 94-square-mile area.

LAUSD conducted a study of student health across all of its schools, examining indicators such as obesity, diabetes, health, pregnancy rates and sexually transmitted diseases. Fremont High was tagged as one of the worst hot spots in the district. This hot-spot designation meant that Fremont High was eligible to receive an on-site clinic that would provide comprehensive medical, dental and mental health services for students and community members.

The suggested clinic location was an abandoned 1.5-acre lot that school officials proposed transforming into green space. The school district contacted the Land Trust, seeking our advice. Shortly afterwards, UMMA, LAUSD and the Land Trust formed an official partnership

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around the concept of a comprehensive wellness center—one that would promote physical and programmatic linkages between the school, the clinic, the garden and the community.

In one of our initial meetings, the partners gathered around a set of blueprints. The drawings showed the proposed 2,500-foot health clinic, a greenhouse, a vegetable and medicinal garden, an orchard and a neighborhood park. My eye, however, kept returning to one curious detail: a proposed cinderblock wall separating the health clinic from the garden. “Can this be removed?” I finally asked, pointing to the drawing. My colleagues at UMMA and LAUSD nodded, “Why not?” So with the strike of the pen, the wall was gone. This small but significant decision exemplified the spirit of the project—namely, our collective willingness to break down barriers in pursuit of the larger goal.

From the outset, we were committed to fully involving the local community in the project. We established a Community Research Team, comprised of local residents and students that went door-to-door, gathering information to fully understand what people wanted from the wellness center and garden. Many of the built features and programs at Fremont are the result of this research.

As the project moved forward, LAUSD was coincidentally in the process of a major academic restructuring of Fremont High to address the school’s chronic

## Children & Nature

Facts compiled by the National Environmental Education Foundation from various sources. See [www.neefusa.org/health/infographic.htm](http://www.neefusa.org/health/infographic.htm).

### The Bad News



More than **1 in 3** children in the U.S. are overweight or obese. Minority and low-income children are disproportionately affected.



**3,600 youth** are diagnosed each year with type-2 diabetes, for which obesity is a major risk factor.



Children have lost **25%** of playtime and **50%** of unstructured outdoor activity over recent decades.

### The Good News



Exposure to nature can reduce stress levels by as much as **28%** in children.



Children living within 2/3 mile of a park with a playground can be **5 times** more likely to have a healthy weight.



Even a **20-minute** walk in nature can help children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder concentrate better.

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inadequacies. Among other things, Fremont was reorganized around the concept of small learning communities. One of these, the MESA program (Medical, Environmental Science, Agriculture), dovetails closely with the mission of the wellness center. Land Trust staff members are now collaborating with teachers to develop nutrition, urban gardening and agriculture classes within the MESA curriculum.

We are very excited about the greenhouse and outdoor gardens, both of which will allow community members to learn about growing healthy foods. This is particularly

important because South LA has the county's highest rate of childhood obesity (29%) compared to 17% of children in West LA, as well as the highest rate of adult diabetes (12%). Compounding matters is the abundance of fast-food chains, liquor stores and smaller convenience stores that sell processed, high-calorie items. Lack of physical activity and poor access to parks only worsens the health picture. There are only 1.2 acres of parkland, for example, for every 1,000 people in South LA.

The Fremont Wellness Center & Community Garden will strengthen the community, create recreational opportunities and serve as an outdoor classroom where residents and students can learn valuable skills from one another. In the medicinal garden, people will have an opportunity to learn about traditional herbal approaches to healing. Other programs will include empowerment classes for women, parent support groups, instructional gardening, orchard maintenance, and arts and crafts. The garden will provide less quantifiable benefits as well, such as relaxing under the cool shade of the orchard, harvesting tomatoes to make homemade salsa, and feeling a general sense of pride and ownership.

On a basic level, we are eager for the students to understand where food really comes from—the Earth, not the grocery store. As an example, in one class, a student saw an egg for the first time in his life. He was so amazed by the egg, and by the realization that it came from a chicken, that he slipped the egg into his pocket

and carried it around for the rest of the school day. These are the kinds of connections that will encourage students to become stewards of community gardens and ultimately champions of their own health care.

We've recently developed a new youth education initiative in conjunction with Fremont called the Gardening Apprenticeship Program (GAP). Funded by Los Angeles County, this program teaches students the basics of gardening, offers hands-on experience and provides exposure to career opportunities in agricultural and environmental sciences through field trips and guest speaker sessions. The 12-week course covers topics such as plant anatomy, soils, beneficial insects, compost and irrigation techniques. Last spring, we graduated 14 middle- and high-school students from the pilot GAP program, and based on its success, enrollment for subsequent sessions has doubled.

Since the beginning of the Fremont project, the Land Trust, UMMA and LAUSD have worked closely together to spearhead the process, getting critical resources secured, engaging community support and putting all the pieces together to bring a much-needed asset to the region. We work closely with residents, training individuals to be the next generation of volunteers, leaders and health advocates for their community.

The Fremont project has been made possible through a diverse mixture of private and public funding. General bond money from the LAUSD has paid for construction of the clinic and garden/greenhouse. The California State Department of Forestry and Fire Protection supported development of the garden, specifically the orchard, as well as project management and program development costs. Chase Bank has enabled the Land Trust to develop curriculum in collaboration with the high school's MESA teachers. Lastly, the California Endowment, a private health foundation, supported our community assessment work.

### Where You Live Matters

Working in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods such as South LA underscores the ultimate power of place. Where people live greatly determines what their health outcomes will likely be. The reality, of course, is that none of us can choose the zip code in which we are born. It's merely a roll of the dice. South LA—which has struggled through decades of racial strife, questionable policies and poor structural decisions—presents its residents with a particular set of circumstances and outcomes.



In historic Filipinotown, Unidad Park serves as a collective backyard for households with little personal outdoor space. The Land Trust works with nonprofit partners such as Consejos Unidad to manage the park and provide programs for residents.

By building parks and actively engaging local residents, the Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust helps to level the playing field between various communities. Our success depends on many partners being at the table. Just as health is influenced by multiple factors in the physical and healthcare environment, creative solutions to health problems must be multifaceted and born of collaboration. In the end, Fremont Wellness Center & Community Garden will be an important model for others to emulate, and I look forward to sharing the important lessons we've learned. 🌱

THE LOS ANGELES NEIGHBORHOOD LAND TRUST'S MISSION IS TO GROW HEALTHIER, SAFER AND STRONGER COMMUNITIES BY CREATING SMALL, ACCESSIBLE URBAN PARKS AND GARDENS THAT HELP REMEDY THE CRITICAL LACK OF GREEN AND RECREATIONAL SPACES IN GREATER LOS ANGELES' UNDERSERVED NEIGHBORHOODS, AND TO ENSURE PARTICIPATION AND COLLABORATION AMONG LOW-INCOME RESIDENTS THROUGHOUT THE PROCESS OF ENVISIONING, BUILDING AND MANAGING THE PARKS AND GARDENS THEY CREATE. ALINA BOKDE IS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR. FREELANCE WRITER EDITH PEPPER GOLTRA ASSISTED WITH THIS ESSAY.