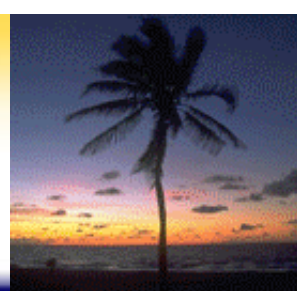




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Venice Skate Park — Teaching a Sense of Responsibility

BY BETSY GOLDMAN

It's been three months since the 16,000-square foot Venice Beach Skate Park opened to rave reviews. Ger-I Lewis, leader of the Venice Surf and Skate Association (VSA) and one of the skateboarders who lobbied for decades to have a skate park built in Venice, reports that there have been over 6,000 visitors and the park now averages 250 users on a weekend.

Have you been there recently? The skate park looks as pristine as it did immediately after the end of construction. Magic fairies don't appear during the night nor do City of Los Angeles maintenance workers work there during the day. It's the VSA volunteers who take their mission seriously to keep the area free of debris and graffiti.

"We set an example by leadership for the kids," says Ger-I. "We show them what they are supposed to be doing — this is how we keep our park clean."

The breakdown in teaching right from wrong is all too evident to him and the other volunteers. "This is a place that needs to be kept clean," he says. "We need to teach the kids — 'this is for you, you have to do it.'"

The skate park is self-regulated, meaning that there is no paid staff. It is the volunteers who keep an eye on what is happening.

"If one of the VSA guys sees a kid doing something inappropriate, he'll say, 'hey, that's not cool, don't do that' and generally they'll understand," says Ger-I. "We're trying to use skateboarding to teach kids that there is a difference between right and wrong."

The VSA must be doing something that sinks in with the youths. The distinction is showing up in the injury rate, with a less than one percent injury per usage ratio in a high-risk sport.

The nearly 16,000 square feet of concrete would be a tagger's dream if it weren't for volunteer night owl Jesse Martinez, who inspects the premises during the wee hours when everyone else is asleep. He says he keeps a donated power washer at home and will use it in the morning to eliminate any unwanted monikers.

As VSA board member Lance LeMond points out, photographers are there every day and their goal is that the park is never photographed or video taped with any graffiti.

"A lot of places remove graffiti by just painting over it," he says. "You can't do it on these surfaces with the ocean right there because of the moisture. It would be slick and you wouldn't be able to skate on it."

He also acknowledges that the group was worried about how it was going to deal with the graffiti even before the park opened. By keeping the concrete clean, they only have the problem every so often and it is quickly removed, LeMond said.

Geri-I says that in three months the skate park has become the most used facility at the beach and the VSA receives no government funding for maintenance. There is a solid core of 15 volunteers who come to the park everyday to make things happen, he notes. Just recently the sump pump at the nearby traffic circle wasn't working and water and sewage backed up in the park bowls with only the volunteers to clean it out.

To assist the volunteers, the VSA is looking for contributions. In addition to the donated power washer which they say was desperately needed to eliminate hours of using a brush, they are in dire need of maintenance equipment, especially landscaping tools and cleaning products. VSA membership, at a cost of \$25, also helps. Go to venicesurfandskateboardassociation.blogspot.com/ to join. Those making contributions will be featured on the VSA Web site and on clothing, as well as banners at the park.

“It will really help us out,” says Ger-I.

The main mission of the VSA is to advocate for skateboarders and surfers and to provide the group a voice in the political arena. “The skate park is a shining example to the youth and everyone in the world as to what we can do as a group of citizens — to become involved with city government as a vehicle to further and better ourselves and our community,” says Ger-I.

He added that there is a long history of skateboarding in Venice and it is fitting that the beachfront skate park be a destination as a worldwide skateboard community.

“We love the park,” says Ger-I. “I’ve been skateboarding for almost 40 years. We spent decades of our lives getting the park. Some of us can’t even skateboard anymore. It’s unfortunate but it’s a tough sport — falling on concrete takes its toll.”

On the way to the skate park is a re-designed plaza on Windward Avenue between Speedway and Ocean Front Walk. Venice Chamber of Commerce president and Venice Beach Suites & Hotel proprietor Andy Layman spearheaded the Windward Plaza restoration campaign to repaint the colorful Venice canal maps decorating the pavement.

Others involved in the beautification effort were City Councilman Bill Rosendahl, the city Department of Recreation and Parks, Naylor Paints, Parrot Painting, Inc. and Desert Brand Flooring and Sealer Products.