

A Better Northfield Starts With Flowers, Group Says

By Allyson Herbst

Northfield residents last summer couldn't help but notice a striking change that bloomed outside the Northfield Public Library. Where once a few scrubby trees dotted a lawn of exposed landscaping fabric and mulch, new plantings sprang up and hundreds of petunias popped out of pots all around.

While the library played a role in its own makeover, the prime mover was actually a new Northfield civic group – a local branch of a national non-profit called “America in Bloom” (AIB) – that is devoted to catalyzing community improvement by planting flowers and trees.

Less than a year old, AIB-Northfield in 2008 planted around \$3,000 worth of flowers around the town's public library, post office, the Northfield Hospital, the Cannon Riverwalk and in Bridge Square. They created an inventory of Northfield's civic assets; sponsored a “Downtown Window Box and Yard Contest;” and worked with the Mayor's Youth Council (MYC) and the police to install flowerboxes on the pedestrian footbridge downtown.

“We're just getting started,” says Northfield resident Pat Allen, the founder of AIB-Northfield and its current chairman. “We have big visions.”

HISTORICAL SIGNAGE

In 2009, Allen says one of AIB's goals is to add 16 new hanging baskets to Northfield's streets. Next year the group also plans to continue work on local historical site signage, an anti-graffiti project, and restoration of the city's old train depot near 3d Street and Highway 3.

A former city planner who has lived in Northfield for 32 years, Allen started the Northfield chapter of AIB last February. She was motivated, she says, to counter a flood of negative Northfield news in recent years stemming from such widely-publicized issues as a local heroin epidemic, and a mayor whose alleged legal lapses have left him facing criminal charges.

“We were interested in changing the conversation here in Northfield,” Allen said. “It’s been so negative. Every time I went to a meeting or got together with friends all we talked about was how terrible things were.”

But is planting flowers and restoring old buildings really the answer to Northfield’s problems? Or is “America in Bloom—Northfield” a rose-colored distraction from teen drug abuse and issues such as the looming effects of the economic crisis?

Allen says AIB’s work is not a distraction but rather a grounding, a means of assessing what Northfield and its citizens do well. The inventory of civic assets, she says, lays the groundwork for meaningful and positive change.

CIVIC PROBLEMS

“People solve problems from their strengths. We need to ask, ‘What are our values, what’s important to us, what do we do well?’”

Beautification is a good place to start the ball rolling, she said. “Focusing on making the community a beautiful place adds to the quality of life.”

Her group’s work is already attracting good local reviews, allowing that no one thinks beautiful flowers, in themselves, solve deeply-rooted civic problems.

“The impact it had was mainly psychological,” said Sam Ruby, a local high school student who helped plant flowers on the downtown footbridge.

“Obviously a pot of flowers isn’t going to fix the heroin issue in Northfield, but it helps to see the flowers there.”

“We can’t make the negative things disappear by planting a few flowers, of course,” added 17-year-old Katherine Peterson, who also worked on the footbridge project. “But we can still show that we do care about our community and are willing to work to make it better.”

Much of AIB’s work has this catalytic nature, Allen said.

“One of our primary jobs [is] to encourage others,” she said. “We’re not going to tell people what to do, we’re going to give them the opportunity.”

CURBING GRAFFITTI

AIB-Northfield plans to collaborate with many more local civic groups in the coming years. “We want to get as many groups in the community involved as we can,” Allen said.

The group plans to contact local mobile home sites, Florella’s Park and Viking Terrace, about landscaping projects, and also hopes to work with local Boy and Girl Scout troops, church groups and other youth groups.

Already, AIB-Northfield is meeting with Northfield police chief Mark Taylor, city council member Scott Davis, and other Northfield community members to address what Allen calls the town’s graffiti problem.

“Graffiti is an indicator of social unrest,” she says. “There is a link between it and vandalism of other sorts.” The group plans to slow the appearance of graffiti through more effective removal and the enactment of a graffiti ordinance.

One of her biggest challenges, Allen said, has been funding the new group.

FLOWER BOXES

In 2008, AIB-Northfield received funds from four major sources and had a budget of around \$16,000. The Northfield Area Foundation contributed the bulk of this money, giving \$12,700 in beautification funds.

The group also received \$2,000 from the Northfield Garden Club, as well as \$1,200 and \$400 contributions from the Northfield Police Department and the Healthy Community Initiative, respectively. The latter two contributions paid for youth-focused activities such as the downtown flowerbox installation.

Nationally, America in Bloom began in 2000 as a project of the horticulture industry to encourage nationwide flower planting and thus increase sales. They were inspired both by a non-profit group called Tree City, U.S.A. which encourages tree planting, and by similarly oriented projects in other countries.

AIB “is patterned off other international programs,” said Alicia Wells, the Communications Coordinator for America in Bloom. Communities in Bloom in Canada, and similar projects in France and Britain, were international programs that also served as models for AIB, she said.

FRIENDLY COMPETITION

The national group hosts “friendly competitions” among its scattered members, judging their local work in eight categories -- Tidiness, Environmental Awareness, Floral Displays, Landscaped Areas, Urban Forestry, Heritage Preservation, Turf and Groundcovers, and Community Involvement.

Each year, judges from the national group visit participating local groups, scoring their projects and offering a list of suggestions for civic improvement. This year was Northfield’s first time competing, and the city received a score of 750 out of a possible 1000 points, scoring highest in the areas of Heritage Preservation and Environmental Effort.

The high score in “Heritage Preservation” was boosted by AIB-Northfield’s Date Built Plaque campaign, a program that encourages Northfield citizens to buy and display small signs bearing their house’s date of construction. Allen maintains that whether a house was built in 1905 or 2005, this is an important step in preserving both the history of that house and of the town as a whole.

AIB will continue its work in Heritage Preservation in the coming months, but its members have decided not to enter this year’s nationwide contest. Instead, they will focus on expanding their existing projects and on incorporating the suggestions given by 2008 judges for improving Northfield. They hope to reenter in 2011.

Though much of AIB’s work is still in the budding phase, Allen says that she and others involved with the project already enjoy definite benefits.

“I’ve lived here 32 years,” she said. “I know this town in ways I didn’t know it before.”