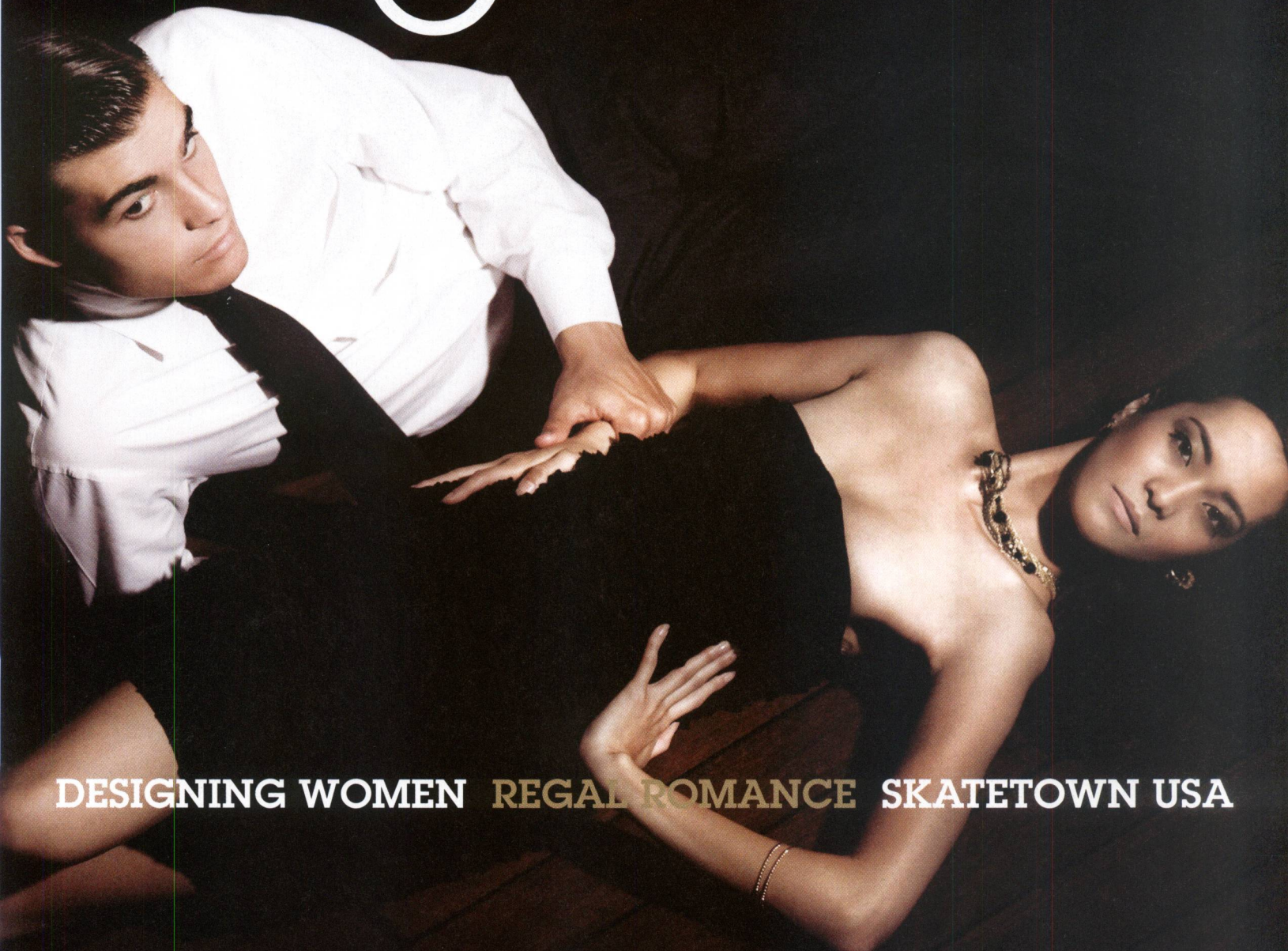


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WHAT A BEAUTIFUL WORLD

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Long Beach became an even better place to live this summer, as more than 60 young people were employed to make a difference.

They cleaned up neighborhoods, painted over graffiti, and helped to landscape the Wrigley Village Community Garden on Pacific Avenue and the Wrigley Garden on Henderson Avenue — all through a grant that matched funds from the Governor’s Office of Emergency Services.

The Summer Beautification Program is administered by the city’s Youth Opportunity Center/Pacific Gateway Workforce Investment Network. It is officially known as the Pacific Gateway/Long Beach Gang Reduction, Intervention, and Prevention (LB GRIP) Beautification Project. A hefty title for a tremendous program that helps kids in at-risk neighborhoods earn money while beautifying their neighborhoods and learning life and leadership skills.

Running from late July through the end of September, the program improved neighborhoods in zip codes 90804, 90806, and 90813. These young people worked 20 hours a week, helped the environment, and learned what it meant to have a job — they also attended workshops on resume writing, interview skills, and how to manage your paycheck.

Teresa Gomez, the City’s Human Dignity Program Coordinator, and Monica Andrews, LB GRIP Consultant and Community Relations Director of PeaceBuilders, manage the Beautification Program. According to Gomez, the program falls in line with the mission and purpose of LB GRIP’s three-prong approach: refer, promote, and enhance. Refer underserved youth and young adults to positive alternatives to gang participation in a safe environment, promote community awareness and education through anti-gang messages, and enhance the coordination of existing efforts and resources related to youth and gang violence prevention, as well as family and community.

“The program also teaches leadership skills, project planning, such as organizing neighborhood clean-ups, and how to tap into city resources,” says Andrews. “These kids have learned a valuable lesson on sustainability, recycling and making a conscious effort to take care of their environment.”

Together they informed youth-based organizations, such as the Boys and Girls Club, Long Beach Weed and Seed, Wrigley Neighborhood Advisory Group, and the Long Beach Police Youth Services Division, about the Beautification Program and encouraged them to create projects for their youth to participate in during the summer.

While clean-up and landscaping efforts make an immediate

improvement, one lasting contribution was the creation of murals for both Wrigley District community gardens.

Volunteer supervisors Deborah Kearn and Annie Greenfeld-Wisner secured donations from Barr Lumber and Long Beach Ace Hardware to create two four-foot by eight-foot murals that will be permanently displayed as gifts from the ten young people who made them. The Pacific Avenue mural features interlocking puzzle pieces which envision what a peaceful city means to them, a city they actually helped to create.

Antoine Cofield is a student at Poly High and president of its Male Academy, a Long Beach Unified School District academic and leadership program that works to improve the graduation rate of underrepresented promising male students. Cofield's summer jobs included working on the neighborhood garden clean-up on Henderson Avenue. "I think it is a blessing to know that I was helping not just the person, which I like to do, but groups of families," he says.

Airrilye Brown, also a student, hopes her association with the summer program will influence others. "We are here to help build our pride," says Brown, who is using her paycheck to help her mom. "We love what we do and hope others will follow our steps and create a cleaner environment."

The Summer Beautification Program also gave these young people real-life lessons they could use right away. Joshua Romero was skateboarding when he saw someone wearing a Long Beach Weed and Seed t-shirt. Asking where he could find one landed him a summer job helping to paint houses, rooms in a daycare facility, and a church. The 22-year-old was even promoted to supervisor.

Formerly in the military, Romero has now found steady employment using his summer experience as a reference. He knows the significance of giving young people the chance to work.

"First, all of these kids haven't had jobs before — there were no interviews, just an opportunity — and they learned how to have jobs," he says of the program's benefits. "The second thing is that being at a [job] agency, learning how to prepare for interviews, is going to help in the future."

And what do the program's leaders want these young people to take away from their experience? "Other than some spending money, [it's] the sense of helping others and making a difference in their communities," says Andrews, "and knowing what a huge impact a small group of people can make." ■

From left to right: Rizaldy Bayot, Keith Taylor, Ashley Betance-Kearn, Adrian Clark, Devin Perkins, Jamal Hunter, Jorge Reyes, Airrilye Brown, Francisco Alvarado, Antoine Cofield.

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