



A special message from Phil Ginsburg and Drew Beshler
April 4, 2020

Golden Gate Park

From Sand Dunes to an Iconic Treasure for Hope, Inspiration and Beauty

On Saturday, Golden Gate Park turns 150. We planned a party. Then the world was upended.

But maybe a party was never the most fitting acknowledgment of what Golden Gate Park means to San Franciscans. On the eve of its birthday, the iconic park is doing what it has always done best—serving as a place of refuge.

When they emerged from the rubble and flames of the earthquake and fire of 1906, San Franciscans found safety in Golden Gate Park. Refugee camps sprang up, regimented into makeshift towns. It was there they rebuilt their lives.

Amid the devastation of the AIDS crisis, people began to gather in Golden Gate Park to create a place to heal, inspire hope and remember loved ones lost to the disease. That special grove is now a national memorial. It has grown into something so much more, where life is celebrated, where people come to also spin colorful flags, play music, and honor the lost by holding fast to joy.

We're here again today. Amid the coronavirus outbreak, neighborhood parks have become sanctuaries to escape our worries for a few moments. The beauty and stillness of nature is a salve for our jangled nerves. The onslaught of bad news and the confinement of our homes are replaced by chirping birds and expansive green space. Time-bending isolation gives way to life all around us, without having to ever breach the social distancing rules.

Parks make us remember what it's like to feel fully human.

That's because parks nurture our collective memories. They are where we experienced childhood: the exhilaration of gliding without training wheels for the first time, the thrill of conquering the tallest slide or the wonder of spotting a hawk.

Parks gave space to our youthful restlessness: our hearts pounding at an unforgettable concert, a first kiss, sneaking out of the house. They are where we find equilibrium while we make our way in an unfamiliar city.

They are the backdrops of weddings, birthdays, and family barbecues. They are sanctums where we grieve. They allow us to relive our memories with our children and create new ones.

Of all of San Francisco's public spaces, Golden Gate Park might be the most important. From the post Gold Rush years to the 1906 earthquake, the World's Fair to the Summer of Love, the AIDS epidemic to the second tech boom, it has served as the City's pastoral oasis through all of its joy, misery, growth and exploration.

Within the Park's majestic canopy are 150 years of stories -- stories about class, race, nationality and religion; stories about conflict and peace; stories about gentrification and equity; stories about constancy and change; stories about stewardship and destruction; stories about technology and nature; stories about celebration and suffering; stories about art, music and food; stories about large gatherings and solitary strolls; stories about communities, neighborhoods and families; stories about all of us.

And while we cannot replace the experience of being in the park, today, we are bringing our park to people around the world to enjoy, virtually through technology, so we can share those stories, memories, amazing outdoor concerts, and all the special moments in time.

Golden Gate Park only gets better with age. In the past 10 years alone, we eradicated invasive species like the African Clawed-Frog. We've planted more than 2000 trees. We've watched the renaissance of the Golden Gate Park coyote, replenished the Bison, nurtured the Rose, Rhododendron and Dahlia Gardens, and we've built many new trails.

In progress are transformational renovations to the Golden Gate Park Tennis Center and Alvord Lake park entrance, a new playground in the Panhandle, and a renovation of the Golden Gate Park dog training area. By 2021 Golden Gate Park will be the largest park in the nation to operate on recycled water.

The park has also witnessed deep despair, vandalism, and serious crime. It has weathered big storms, droughts, erosion, disease and limb failures.

Golden Gate Park is resilient, and it's bigger than any one crisis, natural disaster, outbreak, or political fight. But that doesn't mean that our current stewardship isn't critical. As Ernest Hemingway wrote: *"Today is only one day in all the days that will ever be. But what will happen in all the other days that ever come can depend on what you do today."*

Perhaps only Golden Gate Park itself, the keeper of stories and secrets, knows what its future holds. But undoubtedly the Park's next 150 years will be shaped by its first 150. Tensions between preservation and change will continue but so will the park's role as the guardian of San Francisco's treasured public memory.

Phil Ginsburg is general manager of San Francisco's Recreation and Park Department. Drew Becher is CEO of the San Francisco Parks Alliance. The two organizations are organizing the yearlong celebration of Golden Gate Park's 150th anniversary. This article appeared in the San Francisco Examiner.