

## **Gaining Back Some “Social Capital”**

By Federal Glover

Bigger doesn't necessarily mean better. Ask the organizers of Brentwood's CornFest.

The organizer's made the unorthodox decision to downsize their annual ode to corn so that it can retain the small town ambience that used to characterize it. You know, the blue jeans and “aw shucks” flavor that gave birth to the corn fest and its predecessors had given way to too-tight designer fashions, sunglasses and baseball caps worn backwards.

To counter this organizers downscaled their advertising, moved their fireworks to Friday night before the out-of-towners could attend and closed earlier on Saturday night, before the consumption of alcohol got out of hand and kept the entertainment to local acts..

You can disagree with that reasoning if you want to, but the facts speak for itself. The crowds still came but there were no arrests for public drunkenness or fighting.

But the crowds made up of more local families still came. And reports were that even though it was more low-key, a good time was had by all.

As we move into the heat of summer and our almost equally hot Indian summer, local communities are staging events that are the perfect opportunity for all you newcomers to get to know a bit of the local traditions, history and a chance to meet your fellow residents.

You just missed the CornFest and Isleton's Crawdad Festival, but just around the corner is Antioch's Rivertown Jamboree, Pittsburg's Seafood Festival and Oakley's Almond Festival with the ever-present mascot Ben Toasted.

In the last few years, thousands of newcomers have come to East County for the affordable housing and the suburban lifestyle. Unfortunately, the hours spent commuting, appointments with the doctors, running around driving the kids to dance lessons, karate lessons, Little League, soccer and Pop Warner doesn't leave a whole lot of time for community celebrations.

As a result, many neighborhoods are made up of strangers, there's a distrust between newcomers and so-called “old-timers,” and there's a disconnect between the commuters and the place they call home, public service positions remain vacant, few candidates run for elective offices and those volunteers who do commit themselves to help others get burned out.

There is a lack of community. There is no emotional connection between neighbors. There is no – apologies to Gertrude Stein – there, there.

A book by Robert Putnam titled "Bowling Alone" describes our modern-day condition. In his book, Putnam warns that our stock of social capital -- our connections with each other, has taken a nosedive at the cost of quality of life within our communities. He says that we sign fewer petitions, belong to fewer organizations that meet, know our neighbors less, meet with friends less frequently, and even socialize with our families less often. In other words, we're bowling alone. What fun is in that?

What is social capital? His premise is that social capital, our social networks -- have value. Social capital refers to the collective value of all "social networks" (who you know) and because of these networks, there is a desire to do things for each other.

Social capital creates value for the people who are connected and - at least sometimes - for bystanders as well.

When a group of neighbors informally keep an eye on one another's homes, that's social capital in action. Barn-raising on the frontier was social capital in action, and so too are Internet discussion boards and blogs that form a kind of support group.

Social capital can be found in the fraternal clubs such as Rotary of Lions, friendship networks, neighborhoods, churches, schools, bridge clubs and even community festivals.

Can you imagine Antioch the size of Oakley is today? Many people still remember those days when if you didn't know everybody, you at least heard of them or their family. And people had more than one connection with each other. Often someone would be related to someone you knew who was married a friend of a distant cousin making that person a relative of yours. Instead of six degrees of separation, then there were probably only three degrees.

Well, those days are gone now but those human connections that make up our communities can still be made.

One way of doing it is by attending these festivities put on by our chambers of commerce or the recreation departments of our cities. This newspaper puts out a list of events every day.

Some of them may be full of small-town corniness (pun intended) but isn't that why you live out here at the east end of Contra Costa County? Who knows, you might even meet someone who will become a friend.

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