The playground in the heart of Richmond's Iron Triangle neighborhood sits across the street from drug houses with boarded-up windows. At night, playground visitors fire guns into the air and allow dogs to attack the two swing seats to strengthen their jaws. This is the scene at the Elm Playlot at Eighth and Elm streets, and explains why most residents won't come near the playground day or night, or allow their children to use the park's giant play structure that's tagged with gang language.

There are 54 parks in Richmond, including eight children's playlots, many of them unoccupied because of fear. Last year, Richmond was ranked as the ninth-most-dangerous city in the United States — Oakland was No. 4 — by a private research group.

While Richmond's politicians and police try to put residents' minds at ease, an outside crime fighter has stepped in to make city parks safe.

Toody has reported for duty.

Susan "Toody" Maher, 47, is a five-year resident of Richmond, which she has adopted as her home after living around the world. She is a visionary with a vision of better community living in Richmond.

"Who else is going to do it?" she said. "It might as well be me.

Forty-two percent of crimes in Richmond occur within the Iron Triangle. But when Toody feels motivated, keep an eye on her.

"I am an inventor-entrepreneur," she said. "I can basically take an idea and make it happen. I've had a series of businesses that I've started from scratch. Part of my thing with parks is my parents took us to parks every single day. Our whole social fabric, all the connections we made, was at the park."
Toody was born in Canada, one of five children, and got that nickname at 2 when a brother couldn't say "Susan." After her family moved from Montreal to Pacific Palisades, she attended UC Berkeley, playing volleyball and majoring in history.

Then, while playing pro volleyball in Switzerland, her life changed. A teammate had a cousin who invented the Swatch Watch. Maher decided she wanted to import the watch to the United States. She studied how to write a business plan, then she persuaded the company's president to make her the West Coast distributor for his product.

She next came up with the all-clear Jelly Fish, the No. 1 Swatch Watch seller to this day.

"What I realized," she said, "was that I had good instincts on what people wanted."

She took the money from her Swatch Watch experience and started the first all-clear telephone that flashed when a call came through. Her company reached $5 million in sales, then people copied her invention, effectively stole her business, and she went broke at 30.

Her next venture was a nonprofit organization in San Francisco that created businesses that provided jobs for at-risk youths. The program remains successful, but Maher left after five years. She put on her inventor's hat once more and made money for others — and herself.

Thus, she had enough capital to launch her Richmond parks concept. The city's development agency fell in love with the idea and agreed to fund the first park, the Elm Playlot, at hundreds of thousands of dollars. Maher predicts this project will be completed by spring. Additional funding for other parks, she added, will come from businesses and foundations.

"Parks are the energetic hub of community life," she said of her vision.

She studied European park designs and settled on a spiked, 8-foot iron wall with a front gate that would enclose the parks, which would be locked at night. A "park host" would be assigned to each park, although security guards might also be needed.

"There is a tipping point," Maher said. "If we can just make this first park safe ..."

She has met with numerous Richmond families about "reclaiming" the parks in their area. Some parents told Maher that her vision offers them a "beacon of hope."

"Richmond is an interesting city, a city struggling to emerge," she said. "There are a lot of people in the positions of power who have the vision that this could be a better place."
Reach Dave Newhouse at 510-208-6466 or dnewhouse@bayareanewsgroup.com.

How to help

For details or to be a part of Susan "Toody" Maher's vision for Richmond parks, call 510-215-5500 or e-mail toody@pogopark.org.