

# Community-based Clean Up

By Preeti Shekar



**W**ell before socially responsible businesses became fashionable, Olin Webb and Allen Edson transformed their environmental contracting business, Remediation Services Inc. (RSI) into a community-based enterprise, employing workers from the very communities they work in. Their organization has a triple impact on local communities. They reduce toxic exposure by removing contamination. They strengthen the local economy by hiring and training community members for the work. They help create long term economic health by establishing new sites for economic development within formerly blighted communities.

Since 2002, RSI has been a specialist in environmental field services in the San Francisco bay area, with services ranging from soil and groundwater remediation, hazardous waste removal and transportation, and restoration of disposal sites.

RSI evolved from the environmental advocacy work of Webb, who hails from Bay View Hunters Point, and Oakland-based Edson. Webb and Edson have been environmental justice advocates since the early 1990s, and have played a pioneering role in the redevelopment of brownfields, which are derelict sites contaminated by toxic chemicals. These sites disproportionately impact working class, low-income, and people of color communities, who typically live close to such sites.

Webb and Edson realized that although brownfield restoration projects enabled hazardous sites to be cleaned up and developed, millions of dollars were being paid to external remediation contractors who had no ties or responsibility to the community. They decided that there was no reason for money to leave their already impoverished communities. To accomplish this goal, their organization began to train and hire workers from the communities where the clean-up work was occurring.

As members of the National Black Environmental Justice Network and the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (CBTU), Edson and Webb have always been passionate about rebuilding communities holis-

tically. “Conventional redevelopment models reflect the inherent racism in the way projects are set up,” noted Webb. “So we wanted to make a positive, long term impact in the communities we worked in.” And that’s precisely what they have been doing, by training local community members to be skilled workers, including the 40-hour training to be able to work with hazardous material.

RSI has successfully reached out to undereducated, underutilized black youth—especially people who have been through the criminal justice system. RSI has also teamed up with Young Community Developers (YCD), a community-based job-training agency in Bay View Hunters’ Point, to regularly hire disadvantaged workers for community projects. RSI’s wages are on par with industry pay, averaging \$25 per hour, in addition to vacation, and medical benefits.

One of its long term goals is to hire and sustain workers in San Francisco, Oakland, and Richmond—cities that are slated to experience rapid development in the coming years with major brownfields grants lined up.

RSI’s business model seeks is best summed up by co-owner Edson: “We did start out on a risky venture but its one that has paid off both to the business and to the communities.”

For more information, visit [www.remediationservicesinc.com](http://www.remediationservicesinc.com).

Preeti Shekar is a freelance journalist and a producer at KPFA radio’s Women’s Magazine.

# Green Horticulture in Washington D.C.

by Dawn Gifford

In 2004, D.C. Greenworks' (DCG)— a non-profit that seeks to resolve urban environmental and economic problems by fostering local expertise, job training, and community stewardship—joined forces with the Coalition for the Homeless and the 14th and U Main Street Initiative to form the *Green Team*, a group of men and women charged with maintaining clean, green, and safe streets in the Shaw commercial corridor of Washington DC. In addition to handling litter and graffiti removal, the *Green Team* is also responsible for tree box landscaping and maintenance and provides employment and training opportunities for Shaw's homeless population. By creating a well-maintained commercial district, it has stimulated investment in vacant properties and supports tourism by disseminating heritage and hospitality information about the neighborhood and its attractions.

D.C. Greenworks' Green Collar Job Training programs are a successful marriage of ecology and economy, a living demonstration of how employment and natural resource conservation can support and sustain one another. Its programs address the need for both, clean and green communities, and for education, job training, and employment. Greenworks offers horticultural, arboricultural, and low-impact development training programs to meet the needs of volunteer service corps, parks departments, nurseries, and landscaping businesses.

Washington D.C. is among a growing number of cities that are beginning to explore the viability of an urban green infrastructure as an ecological resource. The Trans-Agency Resources for Environmental and Economic Sustainability (T.R.E.E.S) Project in Los Angeles, for example, estimates that it could create more than 50,000 jobs in environmental infrastructure management. Effective urban ecosystem management can create thousands of jobs and save millions of dollars for communities around the country. In fact, research shows that communities that actively protect their environment have higher rates of job growth, fairer taxes, lower energy costs, better than average public health, a more equitable distribution of wealth,

greater democratic participation, and a better quality of life overall. (See <http://www.treepeople.org/trees/>)

D.C. Greenworks offers training for jobs in landscaping, tree service, low-impact development, park maintenance, and nurseries. With every training program, we work directly with employers, social services, and youth advocacy agencies to find viable placements for its graduates. Since 2000, we have partnered with the Earth Conservation Corps, the DC Department of Parks and Recreation, Covenant House Washington, and the Coalition for the Homeless, among others, to place over 80 people in good jobs.

## Programs that Adapt to Communities

All of D.C. Greenworks' programs strive to be mindful of and relevant to the lives of the poor, multi-ethnic, urban communities they serve. Whether hiring urban youth to build a greenroof in a wealthy suburb, or presenting a tree care workshop in a gentrifying neighborhood, or designing a job-training program for the homeless, D.C. Greenworks looks a little different in each community.

In striving to understand the historical economic and cultural contexts for the attitudes and aspirations of each community, DC Greenworks has learned that

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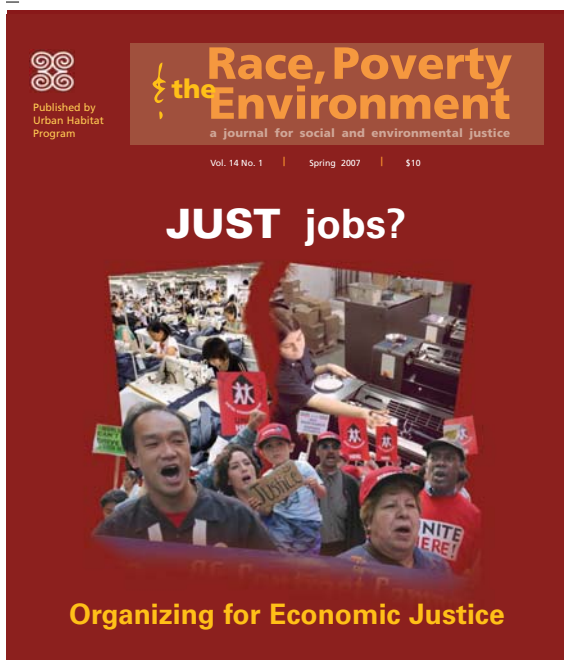
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