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Training as a Mascot; One-Day Makeovers for Streets

BOB DOUGHTY: Welcome to THIS IS AMERICA in VOA Special English. I'm Bob Doughty.

JUNE SIMMS: And I'm June Simms. This week on our program we visit a camp where sports team mascots go for training. We also tell you about a group that helps cities bring new life -- for a day -- to troubled streets. And we learn about a group that helps women in Uganda earn money by selling beads at parties in the United States.

BOB DOUGHTY: Communities often depend on drawings and written documents to describe the changes they want to make to improve neighborhoods. But a nonprofit organization called Better Block shows the public a working example of how the proposed improvements would look. It makes the changes along one block for one day.

JUNE SIMMS: That was how an older, mostly empty business district near downtown Denver, Colorado, came to life on a recent Saturday. A street musician played his guitar as people walked, biked and pushed baby strollers down Twenty-fifth Avenue in the Jefferson Park area. A crowd enjoyed lunch along what had been an empty stretch of sidewalk the day before. One of the empty storefronts became a bike rental shop. Another was a restaurant for the day.

Benches, trees and flowers were brought in for what looked like a street festival. But there was a more serious goal, as Denver Mayor Michael Hancock explained to the crowd.

MICHAEL HANCOCK: "Thank you for what you're doing to make our city great, and to help make Jefferson Park a better block."

BOB DOUGHTY: The idea for the transformation came from a national program called the [Better Block project](#). The program supports urban redevelopment by helping local activists demonstrate how to create a lively atmosphere. Volunteers can spend months getting ready for the short-term transformations.

Gosia Kung is an architect who leads a citizens group called Walk Denver. The group is part of the coalition working to renew the city's urban neighborhoods.

GOSIA KUNG: "Two weeks ago, these spaces were empty, and by empty, I mean rats and pigeons and you name it. And today it's [an] art gallery and a bike shop and restaurants."

JUNE SIMMS: The one-day makeover was designed to help people explore the possibilities for renewing the neighborhood. Gosia Kung says the trees, the flowers, everything was borrowed, so it all had to be returned.

GOSIA KUNG: "This is a kind of low-budget way to create this environment without having to ask for a million-dollar national grant."

The organizers also invited food trucks to come to the event. Tables were set up along the sidewalk to give people a place to sit and eat. One food truck offered different kinds of tacos. Another served pizza baked in a wood-fired oven.

The festive atmosphere appealed to local business owners like Francisco Bustamente. He owns a grocery store that sells Mexican food.

FRANCISCO BUSTAMENTE: "I like this project. I like the party."

Women wearing traditional, rainbow-colored Mexican skirts danced in front of Mr. Bustamente's market. His family served slices of fresh mango to people on the street.

BOB DOUGHTY: Mary Mackey has run an art studio in the neighborhood for twenty years. She also liked the day's party atmosphere. She says a lot of communities are spread out and people have to drive to go places. She herself mostly goes out on foot only to walk her dog.

MARY MACKEY: "It'd be nice to get out of our cars and be able to bike and walk more places, but we're just not that dense of a population like in Europe, so it's a little more difficult."

Ms. Mackey likes the idea of a prettier street. She would like to see improvements that would bring more customers. But she worries that she would have to pay higher rent if property values rise. And she wonders whether the neighborhood is truly ready for a change for the better.

MARY MACKEY: "The trees, yeah. Benches, I don't think they'd last very long. They'd either get graffitied or stolen."

JUNE SIMMS: Susan Shephard represents Jefferson Park on the Denver City Council. She believes the time has come to improve the neighborhood.

SUSAN SHEPHARD: "It's heart-breaking to look around and see sixty percent of these storefronts vacant on a regular basis. And I got here today, and I am so excited. Because it's vibrant here, and there are people, and folks are walking around and talking to each other. This is exactly what a real living street is."

The changes along Twenty-fifth Avenue were temporary. But architect and activist Gosia Kung says supporters are working to get full neighborhood approval for the changes.

GOSIA KUNG: "We're working with local business owners on establishing a local improvement district to raise funds, to raise support and make these changes permanent."

BOB DOUGHTY: A summer camp near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, teaches people how to act as mascots. Mascots are people who dress in costumes to entertain crowds for sports teams, businesses and other organizations. High school student Jesse King attended the camp this summer for the first time.

JESSE KING: "I am the Wildcat. I have learned a lot just about how to develop my personality and I think that will really help me."

Half of the people at the camp were returning campers like Frank Vespe. He is a full-time mascot for a professional baseball team.

FRANK VESPE: "I like to present the campers with skills that I have and learn new skills along the way."

Caren Simmons dresses as a red robin to represent a restaurant.

CAREN SIMMONS: "I have been doing this for eleven years. It is relief and release. I work full time for the federal government. That can be very trying and very frustrating. This is a physical outlet with a lot of physical fun."

The camp is run by a longtime mascot named Erin Blank.

ERIN BLANK: "I started Keystone Mascots about fifteen years ago, mainly because there was a need for people like myself to learn performing skills and have costumes that will be going to be able to fit them in a more effective way."

JUNE SIMMS: Campers learn how mascots should behave and how they should not behave. Erin Blank says safety and responsibility are as important as being entertaining.

ERIN BLANK: "It is to promote the organization they represent. Whether it is a

sport or a school or even a business or a corporation, we want to be the most positive image that the business can put out into the community."

Ms. Blank wanted to be a mascot since she was ten years old.

ERIN BLANK: "In elementary school, I got to wear a Cookie Monster costume, and I fell in love with the activity."

Since then she has worked as a mascot for several sports teams and organizations.

ERIN BLANK: "At forty-two years old I am still being a mascot. It is addicting. I tried to quit four times and it didn't happen. Considering one of the oldest performers I have ever met is seventy-two, it might be a while before I quit again."

BOB DOUGHTY: Erin Blank also builds mascot costumes.

ERIN BLANK: "We actually build them so the whole thing is water washable. We like to put a baseball helmet for our heads. The hair, there is actually ventilation holes throughout the whole head that allow for the steam to rise out, and the same with the body."

But sweat stays inside the costume. Ms. Blank's current costume, as the mascot for a local football team, is all wet after a performance.

ERIN BLANK: "When I put it on, it is probably five degrees hotter than outside. It is humid. Right now it just feels like I am in a kind of rain cloud inside my costume."

JUNE SIMMS: Erin Blank took her campers to a minor league baseball game for their graduation performance. The temperature was near thirty-seven degrees Celsius. But the crowd enjoyed the show, and so did the mascots.

BOB DOUGHTY: Eleven-year-old Madison Blandford recently invited about forty of her friends and neighbors to a party. It was a chance to see -- and buy -- beaded jewelry made by women in Uganda.

MADISON BLANDFORD: "My grandma got me a bracelet, and that's when I got interested."

So Madison started to learn about how the jewelry pieces are created. The colorful beads on necklaces, earrings and bracelets are made of paper.

MADISON BLANDFORD: "It takes thirty seconds for each bead to be made, but the whole process takes two weeks."

Madison wanted to share the story with her friends. Her mother, Sharon Blandford, thought it was a great idea.

SHARON BLANDFORD: "I really felt like this was something that she could learn and grow with, and she could also lead her friends into wanting to do something that's really important and special."

The Blandfords visited the [Bead for Life](#) website and signed up to host a jewelry party.

JUNE SIMMS: Bead for Life started in two thousand four. Founder Torkin Wakefield and her daughter, Devin Hibbard, and a friend had visited Uganda and met a bead maker.

TORKIN WAKEFIELD: "She told us that she loves making beads, but that she had no market for her beads. So we started thinking, 'Why does she think there is no market?' We love these beads and our friends like these beads. Surely, we could find a market."

Bead for Life is a nonprofit group that works to fight poverty. The idea is to help Ugandan women find markets for their jewelry, improve their business skills and change their lives.

BOB DOUGHTY: Devin Hibbard says thousands of women in the United States and around the world have organized Bead for Life parties to sell the beads.

DEVIN HIBBARD: "We came up with this idea of a bead party, which is a woman taking beads to her community, to her house, to her children's school and sharing the beads and the story of the women who make them."

The organizers say that last year, three thousand bead parties worldwide raised three million dollars. They say the Ugandan women are paid first, and the rest of the money is reinvested into education and community development projects in Uganda.

TORKIN WAKEFIELD: "This particular woman started a sweater business, she put a solar panel on top of her shop to charge cell phones. She has chickens out back. She was able to begin several businesses and she's now employing people."

JUNE SIMMS: Stories like that inspired guests at Madison Blandford's party.

The jewelry party raised about one thousand dollars from the guests. It also raised their awareness of people in a far-away country.

BOB DOUGHTY: Brianna Blake produced our program, with reporting by Shelley Schlender, June Soh and Faiza Elmasry. I'm Bob Doughty.

JUNE SIMMS: And I'm June Simms. You can find videos about the bead parties, the Better Block project and the mascot camp at voaspecialenglish.com. You can also read, listen and learn English with our programs and activities. Join us again next week for THIS IS AMERICA in VOA Special English.