

## **Behind the scenes: C.J. Hirschfield directs Children's Fairyland**

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By Mavis Scanlon

Not every executive has to double-check her schedule for puppet meetings before setting up an interview. But when you run a venerable theme park replete with a renowned puppet theater, meetings about marionettes are part of the territory.

As large as puppets loom in the lore and history of Children's Fairyland - the park boasts the longest-running puppet theater in the country - they are actually a small, if integral, part of C.J. Hirschfield's job.

As executive director of the Oakland landmark, she commands a (very) small army of workers who run the 55-year-old park, said to have been Walt Disney's inspiration for Disneyland.

If there is such a thing as a Craigslist epiphany, Hirschfield had one, and it came shortly after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, when she was more than two decades into a prominent career in the cable television industry. The attacks prompted her to evaluate her career, and she realized she wanted a change.

She saw the Fairyland job listing on one of her first visits to the Craigslist online bulletin board. The park was looking for someone savvy in local politics who also had operations experience and community connections.

Hirschfield, who had produced an annual convention in her role as vice president of industry affairs for the California Cable Television & Telecommunications Association, and who had plenty of Oakland connections through her volunteer work with the Oakland Library Advisory Commission, was intrigued.

All she had to do was convince the Fairyland board she was right for the job, and serious about making a life change.

"They were nervous," she said. Not for long.

Shortly after she started, she lobbied for Fairyland to become part of a major bond measure. Fairyland received \$3 million of Oakland's \$198 million Measure DD parks and water bond measure, passed in 2002.

That money has been manna to Hirschfield. Fairyland relies on donations, grants and funding from the city of Oakland for 25 percent of its \$1.4 million budget. But some things are harder to raise money for than others.

"People don't want their name on a plaque that says 'dry rot completely fixed by,'" she said. Measure DD has allowed her to renovate and enlarge the puppet theater, update the park's drainage system, and renovate the Chapel of Peace, among other improvements.

It's not just the city that has responded to Hirschfield's passion for the park and the role it plays in the lives of Oaklanders.

"This is a very small town, and people have a lot of love for Fairyland," she says. "I have no shame asking for things on behalf of Fairyland."

Fairyland's Old West Junction is a perfect example. To build the kid-sized Western town, Hirschfield dug up the original 20-year-old architectural plans. She then found a donor willing to contribute labor, and another donor willing to supply materials.

Hirschfield also helped unify the state's theme parks, which at the time had no trade group. In late 2002 Hirschfield became a founding member of CAPA, the California Amusements and Parks Association.

"It blew my mind that this industry, which has such a huge economic impact on the state of California, had no united voice," she recalled. She helped draft the association's bylaws and was elected chairwoman.

"Her understanding of grass-roots politics was very important," said John Robinson, CAPA's president and CEO.

Not everything has come easily. In 2005 Hirschfield signed a 15-year contract renewal with the city of Oakland after two years of negotiation. The city wanted Fairyland to pay for liability insurance, which it had historically covered. They ended up compromising, but that was just one sticking point.

The city also wanted Fairyland to offer a monthly "free day," which Hirschfield said "would have put me out of business." Through a \$70,000 annual grant from Alameda County First Five - Every Child Counts, Fairyland already offers free admission to 5,000 low-income kids annually. As part of the new agreement, Fairyland extended the free admission to siblings.

The 2005 agreement also calls for Fairyland to offer a "living wage," which is \$9.90 an hour if health benefits are included.

"Conceptually we're all for it," Hirschfield said, "but in reality it's a huge hit to our budget."

Her response is that of a typical entrepreneur: look elsewhere for income.

She added a third area for catered birthday parties, for instance. She also brought in weekend sponsorship partners, and the park even sells plants propagated on the grounds.

"We're hustling as hard as we can" she says.

She must be doing something right: The \$6 admission has not gone up in five years.