

**Testimony of Riverside Park Conservancy
Before the City Council Committee on Parks
City Hall
January 27, 2021**

More than 35 years ago - before Riverside Park Conservancy was formally developed - a woman named Jenny Benitez joined up with several West Harlem neighbors to transform an abandoned lot at 139th Street. Just shy of one acre in size, this small patch of Riverside Park was at that time strewn with trash, abandoned cars, and home to dangerous activity - reflective of the conditions in most New York City Parks at the time, which were neglected and dangerous due to chronic major budget cuts from the Parks Department.

Today, after decades of community-led work to revitalize the land by planting trees, gardens, and building raised beds to grow vegetables, there is now a thriving garden, which continues to be stewarded by volunteers with support from Riverside Park Conservancy. Formally recognized as Riverside Valley Community Garden, it is known to many as “Jenny’s Garden,” in honor of the legacy left behind by Jenny Benitez, who passed away in 2019.

Jenny’s Garden is one of 550 GreenThumb gardens in the City, and over the years, has blossomed into a multi-generational, multi-cultural community of urban gardeners and nature enthusiasts in West Harlem.

For more than 40 years, Jenny’s Garden has been a place of joy and learning for countless individuals, some of whom have been involved briefly to lend a hand or stop by, and others who have been involved for several years as dedicated volunteers or regular visitors. The space has promoted the health of local residents by providing hands-on education, physical exercise, connection to the land and the community - and of course, fresh food.

The Garden serves as an excellent model for local urban agriculture; volunteers of all ages and backgrounds work collaboratively to grow squash, kale, cucumbers, tomatoes, lettuce, peppers, and more, much of which is harvested and donated to the Broadway Presbyterian Church Soup Kitchen at 114th Street throughout the season.

In addition to edible plants, volunteers provide horticultural care to trees, shrubs, and perennials in the surrounding area, including the upper level of the Park alongside Riverside Drive between 135th and 145th Streets. The Garden has a small composting station, which accepts food scrap donations from local residents a regular basis. And beyond its obvious function as space to grow fresh food, Jenny’s Garden also gives New Yorkers a tranquil setting where they can form lasting bonds with neighbors, appreciate nature, and simply take a breath of fresh air.

Riverside Park Conservancy

Riverside Park Conservancy, which was formed by a grassroots network of neighbors in 1986 - and which today cares for nearly 400 acres of parkland - helps provide technical and financial support for Jenny's Garden. But many similar gardens in the City do not have a conservancy to help with technical and financial support for their operations. At a time when our country and our City continues to grapple with the chronic issue of food insecurity, we believe that it is in the best interest of the City to make more resources available to existing community gardens - and to expand this model of community-based urban agriculture in available spaces.

Investing in local agricultural and gardening operations is beneficial on several levels as we collectively work toward building a more equitable and environmentally conscious City. The presence of a thriving community garden enhances the quality of life for the surrounding neighborhood, empowers individuals and their communities, fortifies a network of food security, and supports the local ecology.