

Retha Robinson

A Unique Commitment to the Koshland Program

Early in the morning, at the end of his graveyard shift as a bus operator on the streets of West Alameda, Lester Louis Dixon goes to school. Lester's not a student; he's a community activist with a love for children and pride in his neighborhood. Among his many other civic activities, Lester volunteers at Chipman Middle School in Alameda. During his years at the school he has created a drum corps and drill team that perform in parades and events around the Bay Area. Lester knows his community. He is the answer to one of the central questions the Koshland Program poses when it supports a neighborhood: Who is an unsung hero in your community?

In many neighborhoods you may call your child's teacher, the pastor of a local church, or the nurse down the street who always volunteers at community events. The Koshland Program wants to invest in these individuals because they are the cohesive elements that form their community. Often, the natural leader who lives the next block over is the most important voice a community can possess.

Retha Robinson hears this voice. She taps into neighborhoods throughout the Bay Area, listening to residents and discovering the unconnected, the unsung, the leaders of a community who are not necessarily a part of the "system."

Through her work with the Koshland Program for the last 18 years, she has witnessed its evolution and pioneered some of its lasting innovations. But Retha never rests – she continually seeks out new ways to connect with the Koshland neighborhoods.

"I started out at The San Francisco Foundation as a word processor before the modern era of computers," said Retha. "Back then, we would use white-out on documents because we couldn't go back and delete our mistakes." She worked in the finance department, the director's office, and in a dedicated word processing center

before finding her place with the Koshland Program in 1988.

Even before working for the Koshland Program Retha felt a strong affinity to the central values of the program as she watched it take shape at The San Francisco Foundation. She was drawn to working with community leaders and the direct engagement within the neighborhoods. Retha has seen different directors, from Nancy Pietrafesa to Arnold Perkins to Elaine Lee, take the Koshland Program along various paths, each director building on the successes of their predecessor.

When Retha became director in 1999, she began to narrow the focus of the program on resident leaders and activists like Lester in Alameda. "I began to look for leaders who really lived the idea of civic unity," relates Retha. "In the early years we would award the executive directors of nonprofits and support their work in the community. But as we evolved, we began to concentrate on the residents, those who worked and slept in the neighborhood and were known as leaders out on the streets."

It has not always been easy. "We've learned some lessons over the years," laughed Retha. "But the focus of our approach is to absorb lessons and apply them the next time out."

One important lesson implemented by the Koshland Program is to focus on the target of the group's work. Now the Program concentrates on only one issue related to the community – like disaster preparedness or addressing immigrant issues – in order to more easily impact their work.

Retha understands that her role as director only goes as deep as her roots in the community. She was born and raised in San Francisco, and she is motivated by her memories of growing up on a block where neighbors looked out for one another. "We had a real sense of



neighborhoods today. I get up every morning to come into work at Koshland because I want to reinvigorate that sense of community in all our neighborhoods."