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Urban Oasis: The writer's husband has planted a garden along a strip of busy, grimy Fruitvale Avenue in Oakland, Calif., much to the delight of passersby. Photo by Jessica Robbins

An unexpected highway garden

The writer's husband has planted flowers along a grimy Oakland, Calif., avenue.

By Noelle Robbins

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My husband, Jerry, is in the midst of a midlife crisis. Well, more like a rebirth, actually. And it has inspired a new fascination – not with a convertible or some other fancy toy, but with a simple, colorful garden. A garden he tends, nurtures, and waters almost daily. A tiny garden in a most unexpected place.

And frankly, it is an ugly place. A gritty, rocky spot alongside busy, litter-strewn Fruitvale Avenue on the route between our town of Alameda and the Fruitvale BART Station in Oakland, Calif. It's street most motorists rush down without a second thought – just a way to get from here to there. It is stark, lined with weed-choked sidewalks, chain-link fences, and gray-glass factory buildings. But not everyone drives in a fury of speed down Fruitvale. There are those who walk the distance – across the Fruitvale Bridge, from Alameda to the BART Station – and those who ride their bikes, such as Jerry.

This healthy, gas-saving habit is what put him so close to the pavement, leading to quite an intimate relationship with every inch of the grimy street, and planting in his mind the idea of creating a spot,

albeit small, of cleanliness and wholesome beauty.

He started from the ground up, of course. Collecting bags and bags of garbage. Food wrappers, rubber gloves, paper scraps – careless waste, carelessly thrown into a spot of no account.

He pulled weeds and acacia roots. He dug and turned the rocky soil, preparing it for new life. And then he planted – petunias and poppies, seeds and seedlings. Sunflowers and the stakes to support their lanky growth. He makes numerous trips to the local Home Depot for plants and inspiration. He hauls two plastic gallon jugs full of water on his bicycle every morning to gently moisten the earth and wash the grime from the tender green leaves. His efforts haven't gone unnoticed.

People honk and wave. He gets the thumbs up and a lot of smiles. People stop to chat and wonder aloud about his choice of location, his dedication, his sanity.

The petunias bloom in deep purples and vivid pinks, the poppies in California gold. When the crossing arms lower on the tracks for passing Amtrak or freight trains, which sometimes move very, very slowly across the intersection, drivers and pedestrians, otherwise impatient and frustrated that their forward motion has been halted, sigh and enjoy the pretty shades and sheer gumption of this urban plot.

I am grateful every day for my husband's garden, and the sense of community bonding and accomplishment it gives him.

He devotes a fair amount of time to guarding, fretting over, and tending this little patch of earth. He arranges watering backup when he leaves town. He works tirelessly to coax a flowery abundance from hard-packed dirt almost indistinguishable from its concrete and asphalt surroundings. He is proud of his contribution – his small, but not insignificant effort to fight the drab grittiness on Fruitvale, and to bring a little color and light to commuters pressed by time and worry.

From the start I've good-naturedly indulged my husband's seeming obsession with his tiny floral creation.

It wasn't until he was gone for a long weekend and I walked from our Alameda home, lugging the two water jugs in canvas shopping bags slung over my shoulders, over the bridge and one-mile-plus to douse the flowers (a feat that truly impressed and touched my husband) that I saw it from a different perspective.

People on foot, on bikes and in cars, smiled as I crouched over the flowers. They stopped to chat. The garden provided a chance to connect, to communicate.

Robert, an unlikely neighbor who lives in an RV behind the fence directly across the sidewalk from the garden, told me, "No space is too small to make a difference."

My load felt much lighter as I walked home, not only physically, but spiritually, as well.

I feel a deeper appreciation for what this flower patch means to Jerry, and to others who share it for brief moments as they pass by every day.

And yet, despite my husband's tenderhearted endeavor to bring a touch of loveliness to this blighted location, he is banned from officially adopting the spot because he is not an Oakland resident. That hasn't stopped him, however, from approaching Alameda Bicycle, which runs a valet service at the BART station, to become an official sponsor so that this stretch of Fruitvale Avenue can participate

in Oakland's annual "Adopt-A-Spot for Daffodil Bulbs" campaign.

No red convertibles, no fast motorboats for my husband. Just a tiny midlife project – an urban oasis blooming crazy shades of plum and fuchsia and cotton-candy pink, sunny yellow, and a little golden orange thrown in for good measure.

It's all for the pleasure of the passing human parade, for the pleasure of my husband. And for his time and patience, his gift of life, of caring – a little space, a big difference.