

Sunland-Tujunga: Realizing Our Full Potential

By Paolina Milana

This past April, the North Valley Reporter published an article written by Marlene Hitt. "*Gateway '76, the History of Change*" told the story of a group that formed in Sunland-Tujunga back in 1971 called "Gateway '76" who made it their mission to seek an identity for this area, realizing the potential if they were to leverage the community's proximity to the Angeles National Forest. One of the group's leaders Bob McKee wrote in July, '71 (Record Ledger) that Gateway '76 "would give the community a chance to adopt a brand new lifestyle, improve property values, enhance local business and, for the first time, give a chance to place direction on where this town is going."

I agree with the wisdom started decades ago. And so, too, did an overwhelming majority of community members who joined us during the June 12 Sunland-Tujunga Neighborhood Council and participated in the presentation I gave entitled "*Sunland-Tujunga: Realizing Our Full Potential.*" (This presentation in its entirety is available for download here [link to come]). This article, however, sums up its thoughts as well as the community response and direction moving forward.)

Millions of people from around the world visit the Angeles National Forest each year. Those millions pass through our town to do it. Sunland-Tujunga has a great many needs: road repairs; funding for beautification projects; quality retail stores; and more. Tapping into the already existing powerful draw of the Angeles National Forest and "piggy backing" on it would do our community a world of good, helping to open doors in the way of credibility, economic investment, and tourism.

While there are indisputable facts about Sunland-Tujunga:

- We're set against a majestic mountain backdrop; nature surrounds us.
- We offer three access points to the 700,000 acre "urban National Forest" that offers everything from solitude and quiet commune with nature to fun-filled recreational activities including fishing, biking, horse-back riding, camping, skiing, and more.
- We enjoy a diverse population and a rich rural entrepreneur history.

And yet, with all these positives, we seem to be a best-kept secret.

As a result, our community suffers:

- Fewer funds are allocated to us.
- We're unable to attract quality commercial businesses.
- Home owners and business look elsewhere to build.
- Internally, we feel a lack of pride, shown in our community lack of participation.

- To government forces and corporations with agendas, we're not viewed as a "unified force with which to be reckoned."
- We spend a lot of our time explaining or "proving" our worth, and that takes away from the time we could spend focusing on getting what we need.
- Unused lots, abandoned buildings, and vacant grounds stand as open soars far too long, drawing homeless, gang activity, drug use, crime, garbage, and decreased safety.

Sunland-Tujunga needs and deserves better.

Building our brand will help us do it.

We all know "brand" when we see it: The Swoosh, the Golden Arches, the one-bite apple.

NIKE, McDonald's, Apple: each of these brands have in common what every great brand does: they are identifiable, credible, differentiate themselves from others, claims made can be validated, they build loyalty, they immediately have an advantage over their competitors, and while they are consistent at their core, they do not stagnate. McDonald's, for example, is always McDonald's at its core, but its personality, its identity "morphs" with the times: "You deserve a break today"; "Food, folks & fun"; "I'm lovin' it."

Branding isn't limited to big companies. Branding is important - maybe even more important - for communities as well. A strong brand can bring a wealth of opportunities for a community, helping it define itself, present its value, and become a magnet to draw others (people, businesses, economic investment, government funding, etc.).

Don't believe me? Just take a look at Pennsylvania, a town with a population under 6,000 - Punxsutawney - that has made its brand famous with its celebrity groundhog "Punxsutawney Phil." That tiny town inspired the 1993 movie "Groundhog Day" starring Bill Murray, and as a result, it has since enjoyed a sense of community pride, an influx of tourism and notoriety, and an increase in economic investment. And there are hundreds of other community examples.

When doing a simple Google search for "Sunland-Tujunga" under the Images tab, what results is not pretty. Visuals of marijuana, drug busts, garbage, empty lots, abandoned buildings, homeless, logos and signage of every kind, color, and messaging pop up. Anyone from the outside looking in has no other option than to think that WE are not where they want to be. And that hurts us, spiritually and economically.

Branding ourselves is more than a name, a tagline, a logo, signage, colors, fonts, a website...

Branding is about getting to the stage where a mere mention of the Sunland-Tujunga name instantly triggers a mental picture of our community, communicates our image, and has the power to influence people's opinions about us and decisions to participate in our programs, our fundraisers, our community, etc., as well as to spend money visiting us, buying a home and/or establishing their businesses here.

Sunland-Tujunga has so many needs. Roads including Oro Vista and St. Estaban are hazards, our commerce needs to entice quality retailers, and I could go on and on. But I'd be wasting time explaining what we all know is true. Just as - based on those who attended our community meeting on June 12 - we all know and are in support of what we need to do about it.

To realize Sunland-Tujunga's full potential, we're going to leverage the indisputable and immediately recognizable draw of the Angeles National Forest. Sunland-Tujunga is laying claim to and owning as its brand: "Gateway to the Angeles Forest™." Doing so affords us the following:

- We immediately give the rest of the world a sense of where we are geographically.
- We immediately put forth to everyone a visual of the beauty that is our backdrop.
- We immediately underscore the importance of our position as a community and become instantly recognizable.
- We "piggy back" on all of the branding and promotion and information that exists and attracts in relation to the Angeles National Forest itself.
- We bridge our past (Gateway '76) and what they started with our present and build into our future.
- We benefit from instant traction, allowing us to focus our real energies and efforts to bringing our brand to life and using it to get what we need and deserve.

In the coming weeks and months, we'll be soliciting community participation to help us realize our full potential. We'll especially be tapping into our future - the children of Sunland-Tujunga - who are bundles of creative tech-savvy energy sources - to help us with how we bring our brand to life. I welcome ideas and team mates to help make a difference with this initiative. As VP of Community Improvement on the Sunland-Tujunga Council, I invite you to contact me at paolinamilana8@gmail.com to share your thoughts and join the branding team. Only we can make a difference. Get involved. And let's start REALLY realizing all Sunland-Tujunga deserves to be.