



## Odd Buildings: A Hidden Charity on 23rd Street

By Jamie Goldberg  
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*The Mission is full of buildings that give one the sense that something interesting is happening inside. We call them Odd Buildings, and this is an occasional series on their stories.*

The curtained windows make the expansive white building at the corner of 23rd and Shotwell streets appear unassuming; its newly painted exterior, as if someone might be readying it for sale. As it turns out, the first impression is truer — but with a twist.

Inside lives a quiet charitable organization with a colorful history dating back to the late 1960s and '70s — a time, according to “Ten Years that Shook the City,” a book of historical essays edited by Chris Carlsson, when more than 5,000 communes sprung up nationwide, with hundreds in San Francisco.

When Mission Loc@l knocked on the door on 23rd Street recently, it was opened by an elderly gentleman named Irving Rosenthal, one of four unpaid officers of Rebirth and Development Inc., a charitable organization that has been on 23rd Street since 1974.

Now in his 80s, Rosenthal founded a commune in the late 1960s that became known as Kaliflower, after the intercommunal newsletter it published weekly from April 1969 to December 1971 and intermittently after 1971. The group first printed the newsletter in the basement of 1873 Sutter St., which was then the Free Print Shop. It later moved to 1209 Scott St., and in June 1974, the operation moved to its current Mission location and became Rebirth and Development Inc.

Rosenthal declined to offer any information for print, and later, over the phone, said that he does not want to advertise the charitable organization. He added, however, that it could use more [volunteers](#) for its various good deeds.

The triangular-shaped property with addresses at 3145 23rd St. and 903 Shotwell St. has its own history. The building was built in 1885 and in 1900 was owned by J.H. Kruse, who had lumber and hardware businesses in San Francisco, according to public records. It was situated alongside the tracks of the Southern Pacific railway, but based on public records, it appears the railroad never used it. Nowadays, the group’s community garden is planted where the train line once ran.

Similar to Kaliflower, Rebirth and Development offers emergency and transition shelter through the Small Free Inn, a food pantry through the Food Room, referral charts from the Free Print Shop, and the community garden, according to public records.

All are housed in the corner building, which from the outside looks almost abandoned.

While the Free Print Shop no longer prints the Kaliflower newsletter, it does offer 11 free, up-to-date charts that list places to find free food, shelter, medical aid and mental health care. The shop also offers a “Neighborhood Fix-It” chart, which lists contact information for neighborhood services, according to the [Free Print Shop website](#).

The charts can be downloaded from the website, which gets 7,100 visitors a month, according to the organization's 2010 public filings.

According to "Ten Years that Shook the City," the original Kaliflower commune also supported the distribution of free food, and helped organize the Free Food Conspiracy in 1968. In the latter, communes pooled food stamps to buy food to distribute as needed to each commune. Kaliflower also had a communal garden.

Nowadays, the organization still supports a community garden and offers limited free food at the 23rd Street location. The organization's goal, according to its public filings, is to help the "poor in innovative ways."

Neighbors said there used to be a sign advertising the community garden before the property was painted about a month ago. One neighbor said she takes her brother to the garden when it's open. It's a quiet garden, she said, that looks a bit like a jungle, with trees and bamboo stalks.

In 2009, 250 people partook in gardening instruction at the community garden, according to the organization's 2009 public filings. The group also offers oversight and support for video and photo documentaries, as well as a community library, according to the filings.

The group operates the food pantry out of the house and shelters a small number of people. In 2009, they sheltered 10 people and offered free food to 150 families, according to the 2009 filings.

The goal of the organization's transitional housing program is to "provide counseling, safety, and shelter for homeless people who really want to better themselves."

None of the mostly Spanish-speaking neighbors Mission Loc@l talked with, including those who live in adjacent Drake Court, as well as some who have lived in the neighborhood for more than 20 years, knew anything about the services the organization offers, other than the community garden.

By staying under the radar and relying on word of mouth, Rosenthal said, the organization stays "pure."

*While the charitable organization does not have a website listing all its services, volunteers and others can find information about the Free Print Shop at <http://www.freeprintshop.org>.*