

The Heights

A photo exhibit by Matt Gainer

It's a brisk January morning in the City Heights neighborhood of San Diego, and I've just finished walking several miles of side-streets, alleys, and thoroughfares, hoping to get to know the community, and to find inspiration for photographs. The buildings here have the same weathered stucco façades that pepper much of Southern California, and the people on the street are incredibly diverse for such a small geographic space. Everyday I've worked here I've encountered beautiful, simple exchanges.

A group of emo kids weaves in and out of a crowd waiting to board a bus. One stops to help a man in a wheelchair. Six or eight Somali men wearing ma'awiis stroll past a taco stand, two of them stop to place an order. They linger for a while, laughing with the owner. An elderly man lays on a white sofa in a parking lot, reading the newspaper and waiting for the sun to set. In the course of fifteen minutes, three different people stop to talk...all are living on the streets or in canyons. These scenes play out over and over in the Heights...brief interactions between neighbors, and quiet, mundane evidence that news reports of problems in the Heights don't always paint the whole picture of what makes this place tick.



Orange Ave & 52nd Street

After a few days of inchoate wandering, watching, and note taking, it seemed I'd learned what I needed from the signs in ethnic enclaves, pop culture veneer, and places people congregated in the Heights. I made arrangements to visit with a group of volunteers who did a weekly food distribution for the needy. When I arrived at Bridge of Hope, one of the volunteers reached out to hand me a bag and told me to take whatever I wanted. There was plenty to go around. I explained that I had come to talk to folks, and maybe make a few photos. It turned out that many of the people handing out food were former recipients of the program. Generosity, it seemed, was contagious. After the distribution ended, I sat down to talk with the woman who started the program from her garage several years earlier. When I asked Sherri Briggs what she thought was the most important thing that could be done to address needs in the community, she simply replied "Love them". Sherri understood the nuts and bolts of how to get food and clothes and furniture to people who needed it. She had a deep appreciation of the need for access to affordable healthcare, safe housing, and stable employment. But at the top of her list was "crying with those who cry... You know, mourn with those who mourn, laugh with those who laugh. Just sitting and being there. We've got to go the whole mile."



Sherri Briggs and volunteers at Bridge of Hope

Sherri was the first of dozens of people in the Heights to tell me her story, to sit for photographs, and to talk about building and maintaining community. She was also the first of several people I met who had firsthand experience of profound need at some point in life, and who used their experience to inform how they would ultimately help others.



Prince

A few days after meeting Sherri, I met a young Congolese man named Prince. When he was still a toddler both of his parents were murdered in Rwanda, and he spent the next 15 years of his life moving from family member to family member, place to place. His parents "...were victims of the genocide. They were assassinated in the genocide and then I got a chance to move to Congo with help from UNHCR, because at that time they tried to evacuate the people, especially the kids, and I was only 2-years old. Some of my family was in Congo. I got a chance to meet Auntie and my cousins and we lived together there. In 1997 the fall of Kabila Mobutu happened and we had to move, to run away to avoid being killed. Then after running and walking a lot of miles my auntie was tired and old and in 1998 she passed away. I moved in with my cousins. In 1999, my cousin got a chance to get married. She got married with a guy in village called Mosisi, and then we moved there... So we moved, but there was too much discrimination because most of them thought that I'm Rwandese and then they were having a lot of problem with tribal things and said Congolese can't get along with Rwandese, especially

Tootsi. They were thinking that I was Tootsi, but I'm a Congolese by nationality. Because my parents used to go to Rwanda for business, they thought that I'm like that and they started to discriminate us too. Then they tried to fight us every single day, especially my cousin and me. One night people came and they put fire on our house and they were supposed to run and then we run like that and then we ended in Goma which is a big city of Congo. Then after that we keep running. In 2006 we ended in Kampala. It's in Uganda. Then we became refugees there. We lived. Life wasn't easy, but we kept living there.”

Along with the emotional and psychological void left by a life on the move, Prince also had a literal hole in his heart - an affliction he was born with - and one that located his needs well outside the scope of typical services for refugees. When he eventually settled in City Heights, he was told by doctors that he had a very slim chance of surviving the surgery he needed, but in 2010 he had it anyway. At 22 years old his heart is mended, and now Prince is flourishing. He uses extra wages from his job in America to help more than 200 children attend school in Uganda, and he is in the process of building a nonprofit to expand the reach of his efforts. It is impossible to talk with someone who has lived through so much trauma, and used the experiences to inform a program to help others, and not feel both humbled and inspired. Over the past couple of months I have spent time with several people who had similar stories of persecution, conflict, and migration under duress — Lameck from Barundi, Gerald from Uganda, others from Somalia, Eritrea, Vietnam and Cambodia. Their stories are also similarly compelling, and all had trajectories that led to the Heights, and to making positive impacts once they arrived.

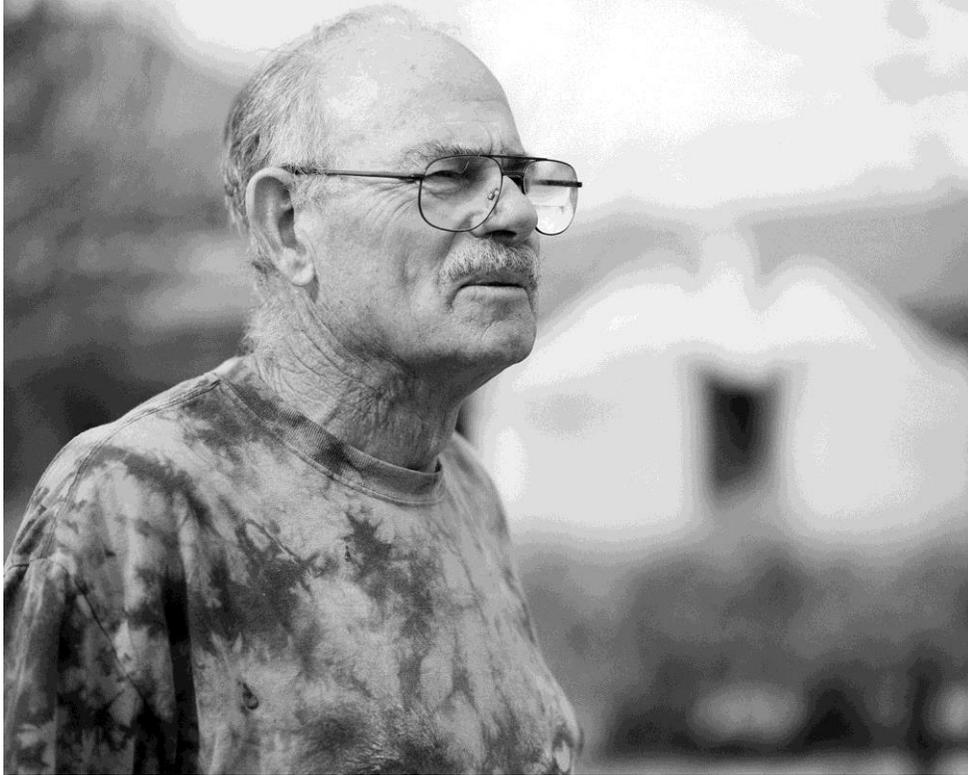
I met Cisco on a late afternoon a few weeks later, a man with a life story that has all the elements of a tragic novel. Deep problems at home, abject violence in the streets, positive arcs and upswings, and deep troughs of struggle. A combined sense of hopelessness and belonging led Cisco to find 'family' with gangs, and gang life eventually led to prison. He told me that “in the beginning it was good to go in. It just felt good. It was part of the rhythm and the culture of being in that lifestyle which is gangs. Going in it felt good. Go lift some weights and all that...do what you got to do in there. Do your time. It felt good. It felt real, real good...You come out and your status is even bigger when you come out. When you come out you go straight to the park. You're healthy. You're buffed out because you've been lifting up weights and you're back right there in the same thing, because that's all I knew. That was my life...It numbs my mentality and numbs my thoughts. Everything. So I went with that rhythm for many years. Many, many years...”.



Cisco

After what seemed like an endless cycle of violence, aggression, and incredible risk, Cisco found a way out. “When I was locked up the last time, somebody brought the gospel to me. They preached the gospel. If there is anything I can remember it was the time they preached the gospel. That was the time that I was really, really tired. I had my cell mate, my cellie – they call them “cellies” – cell mate and that was it. That was it...I picked up the Bible and started reading and on the third day, like shock and awe, and I grabbed the bars of my cell and I go, ‘Whoa! What’s happening?’ This happened because I read the Bible. It felt like I did some coke...I’ve tried Budweiser. I’ve tried Tequila. I’ve tried drugs. I’ve tried women. I’ve tried gang-banging. I’ve tried it all. I tried the Lord and I said ‘Whoa...!’”

Cisco started breaking up fights in prison, intervening when hits were called, and stopping the riots instead of riding them for the adrenaline rush. When he got out he embraced the role of peacemaker, and has been steadily chipping away at the gang problem in the Heights for years — partly through a large annual event he started called The San Diego Low Rider Gospel Fest, and partly through slow, steady, persistent work. He mediates between rival gangs, helps kids through crisis, and mentors them out of the gang life. One of the biggest challenges he sees for dealing with gang violence in east San Diego is that most of it happens after city services have closed for the day, so one of Cisco’s goals is to set up a ‘safe space’ that can be used to get people in crisis through the night, until other programs are open and available to help the next day.



Ken

I began my last day photographing with a visit to the “Peace Garden” in the Fairmount Village neighborhood. It is one of several community gardens in City Heights, and seemed like a good place to watch the sunrise and nurse a big cup of coffee. I didn’t plan to stay for long, but somehow managed not to leave for six or seven hours. The first person I met at the garden was Ken, who grew up on a farm in the San Joaquin Valley, and moved to City Heights in the mid-1960s. Many of his neighbors have been in the neighborhood for decades — most of those I met arrived a short time after the area was initially developed. Ken told me that the Peace Garden is a cooperative between four different organizations: the American Friends Service Committee of San Diego, the Church of the Brethren, the San Diego Quaker Meeting or Friends Meeting, and the San Diego Peace Resource Center. All four of the organizations are involved in creating peace and building community. Over the next few hours I would meet people involved with everything from helping migrants survive their journeys, to helping school kids make peace in the streets.

My experience with this project has been one of constant discovery, and of immense generosity from the strangers who took time to tell me their stories, share their lives, and allow me to photograph them. My hope is that having these photos here at the conference will help put a face to the important research, ideas, and decisions that emerge from the Innovating to End Urban Poverty conference. I also hope they remind us that as we go about the business of shaping policy, planning, and development, there are lots of folks already working on the same questions, issues, and places, whose local perspective and experience might be of value to our efforts.