City Heights neighborhood gets 'FaceLift'; Volunteers team with businesses to help brighten up homes

San Diego Union-Tribune - Sunday, June 15, 1997
Author: Barry M. Bloom

A cover of early morning gray clouds and a sprinkle of rain did not deter this group of 350 volunteers from completing yesterday's task.

On a winding pair of sloping City Heights streets, 30 houses received a dab of pastel paint here and a new flower bed there. Garbage on Wightman Street and Auburn Drive was being hauled away by the ton.

It was "FaceLift" Saturday on these inner-city San Diego blocks just a short jog from University Avenue and beneath the shadow of the City Heights Tower, a bar and neighborhood modern art project that has become a kitsch landmark of sorts.

"I'm here because I want to be here," said Julie Haeger, a State Farm insurance claims representative, who lives in Escondido, rubbing specks of green paint from just below her left eye. "I like to volunteer for these kind of things. I think it's important to give something back to the neighborhoods."

San Diego Neighborhood Housing Services (NHS) brought together 30 businesses and community-based organizations to work with low-income, elderly, disabled and other homeowners and renters to give this small slice of the city a much-needed face lift. Union Bank of California and insurance companies like State Farm and Hartford Group went toe-to-toe with a halfway house called CRASH and a neighborhood security force known as CHOP.

Each group or business had its own home to refurbish. Each donated $1,500 for materials, plus warm, eager bodies to help homeowners beautify houses that appeared worn and weather beaten at dawn, but had sprung back to life as a hot sun broke through cloud cover by late morning.

The NHS has similar organizations in some 200 towns and cities across the United States.

"I didn't believe people like this existed anymore," said Elmer Cunningham, 75 and a homeowner on Wightman Street since 1952. "Everyone is so friendly. I have a breathing problem. This is something I couldn't do for myself."

This is also something the NHS could not accomplish without a major benefactor. In this case, it is San Diego philanthropist Sol Price, who recently donated $1 million to the project with the stipulation that the money is spent in City Heights only.

Christi Sabino, a NHS coordinator, noted that because of the Price contribution, four
more similar FaceLift projects will be sponsored in City Heights by July 1998. A joint venture with United Way is slated for this coming September on several streets that have yet to be identified.

Price, who built the local Price Clubs into a major retail corporation, has already earmarked $5 million for a new neighborhood library nearby at Fairmount Avenue and Wightman Street to replace the East San Diego branch. It is due for completion next summer.

Price recently created a $4 million scholarship program for inner-city students wishing to combine community college with work experience and mentoring.

Price has also teamed with William Jones, a Harvard-trained former city councilman who runs CityLink Investment Corp., to underwrite a master plan for the revitalization for City Heights . It is a multiethnic neighborhood of 75,000 people trying to overcome a rash of gang-related crimes and a poor public image.

"There's still a bad element around here," Cunningham said as his house was repainted from faded beige to a muted blue. "But we'll take care of that later."

Price and Jones know money isn't the elixir. There must be community will and cooperation.

"Sol really does demand -- in a very positive way -- sweat for his money," community activist Michael Sprague said recently.

Rivers of sweat flowed yesterday down Wightman Street into Auburn Drive. Dressed in bright yellow T-shirts, teams gathered for group photographs in front of homes newly painted in bright colors like spruce and canary.

Capt. Bruce Norman and several men from Fire Station 17 -- smack in the middle of City Heights -- seemed like pied pipers as they slowly maneuvered a fire truck laden with smiling children door-to-door.

The firemen donated smoke detectors for each rejuvenated home, each constructed in the 1940s and '50s of wood that appears to be dry and rotting; many of them potential fire hazards. "It's a safety consideration," Norman said. "More often than not, we go inside and these houses don't even have them."

As a final touch and seemingly even more appropriate on Flag Day, American flags were posted in the front yard of each home as work began to wind down.

"This symbolizes the American Dream," said Dean Rohrbach, NHS executive director. "This is what everyone hopes to attain, and this is what this volunteer effort is all about."
1. Fresh face: Deanna DiMaio, 12, painted the front porch of a house on Wightman Street in City Heights during "FaceLift" yesterday morning. 2. Teamwork: Seana Earls, 8, a resident of City Heights, helped volunteer Jeff Ott pick up litter in the neighborhood.

1, 2. RONI GALGANO / Union-Tribune photos

Edition: 1, 2
Section: LOCAL
Page: B-6

Index Terms: BUILDING ; BUSINESS ; CHARITIES ; HOUSING ; NEIGHBORHOODS ; SAN DIEGO ; VOLUNTEERS
Record Number: UTS1326911
Copyright 1997, 2007 Union-Tribune Publishing Co.

***Reproduced with permission granted by San Diego Union-Tribune***
Full-text obtained via NewsBank