Sculpture garden reflects area; Themed benches tell story of City Heights
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Chamoune Avenue and Landis Street in City Heights used to be an unremarkable intersection in an urban neighborhood.

Now it's an artistic showcase highlighting one of San Diego's most diverse communities.

A bright, multicolored sculpture garden fashioned from bronze and ceramic tiles was unveiled Friday outside the entrance of Rosa Parks Elementary School on land belonging to the campus.

Donated by Price Charities, the Price family and Los Angeles resident Rob Goodman, a friend of the family, the project was unveiled at a dedication attended by about 100 people, including Rosa Parks students.

The installation, "The Storyteller," was created by artist Sayoko Kay Mura of Kailua, Hawaii, and celebrates the diversity, people and history of City Heights. This community is sometimes called "the Ellis Island of San Diego" for being a hub for immigrants and refugees from around the world.

The focal point is the towering figure of a female storyteller with arms outstretched, eyes closed and mouth open. She wears a dress with patterns that reflect textile designs from many cultures. Sitting with her bare feet straight in front of her, she's surrounded by benches that invite visitors to sit and read.

Each bench is designed around a theme: "The School," "The Children," "The Neighborhood," "The Community" and "Rosa Parks," the iconic civil rights leader for whom the school is named.

Benches are covered with tiles imprinted with texts or hand-painted with illustrations of events, scenes and people related to City Heights. "The Children" features poems written by third-graders. "The Community" celebrates the lives of City Heights residents.

"I am hoping the community will love it and protect it because it's about them," said Mura, who spent more than a year working on the pieces.

She talked with parents at Rosa Parks Elementary, read up on the history of City Heights and sought ideas from the school staff to shape her vision. Her inclusive approach was applauded.
"People can come here and feel like they are part of this neighborhood, and where they come from and what they do have value," said Rosario Martinez-Iannacone, a Rosa Parks parent whose story of growing up in City Heights is summarized on a tile on the bench titled "The Community."

Mura chose the theme of storytelling because it's universal.

"We all have our stories. That's how we relate," she said.

The "Storyteller" sculpture is designed so that children can sit on the figure's lap, outstretched arms or legs. Indeed, a group of Rosa Parks fifth-graders did just that while posing for pictures after the dedication.

The sculpture garden cost about $250,000, according to Price Charities, which has a long-standing history of philanthropy in City Heights.

Sol Price, who founded Price Club, and his son, Robert, who is chief executive of PriceSmart, an operator of overseas warehouse stores, were at the ceremony. So was Goodman.

Visitors who read the text on the tiles will learn some interesting history about the neighborhood.

In 1912, when City Heights had a population of 4,000, voters decided to incorporate the area into the city of East San Diego. It was then the second-largest city in the county.

"Trustees of the city prohibited liquor sales, gambling and dance halls, gun-toting, driving a car faster than 15 miles per hour, or hitching one's horse on University Avenue," one tile on the "Neighborhood" bench read.

The "Community" bench features greetings in different languages, including Korean, Vietnamese, French, Arabic and Spanish.

Mura believes art should be accessible to everyone.

"It's a piece for everybody," she said of "The Storyteller." "Often art is looked upon as very exclusive. It's in museums. It's in front of banks."

Caption: 3 PICS
1. Sculpture fabricator Bruce Phillips (left) and James Bolamperti installed the face of "The Storyteller" in a new garden in City Heights. 2. Sayoko Kay Mura (right), the artist who created "The Storyteller," directed Bruce Phillips as he installed a portion of her work in the sculpture garden. 3. Bruce Phillips guided the installation of the Rosa Parks bench, one of several mosaic benches in the new sculpture garden, which was
dedicated Friday at Rosa Parks Elementary School. 1,2,3. John Gastaldo / Union-Tribune
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