Magic Johnson's Starbucks in City Heights: Ex-NBA star talks of deal to bring businesses to underserved areas

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The City Heights crowd was waiting for basketball great Earvin "Magic" Johnson to arrive yesterday, when the Hoover High School marching band struck up a tune and Diamante Price's tiny feet just started dancing.

The 1-year-old, momentarily upstaging the former NBA superstar, shuffled around outside the recently opened Starbucks in the Urban Village Retail Center on Fairmount Avenue as his mother, Carmen Price, beamed.

Magic -- towering above the assembly -- strolled in for the official grand opening of the coffee retailer and garnered applause only slightly louder than the appreciation shown Diamante, barely knee-high.

But Johnson got the chant, "Magic, Magic," from 20 tots from the Head Start program across the street, who walked over for the celebration.

Johnson was there to talk about his company, Johnson Development Corp., which has formed a 50-50 joint venture with Starbucks to open stores in underserved communities nationwide.

The City Heights Starbucks was the 30th store, officially opening Sept. 8, but only the second drive-through developed by the partnership, Urban Coffee Opportunities. Johnson's company opened the 31st store Sept. 28 on Sweetwater Road in National City.

He came to the San Diego community to meet the neighbors.

"It is important to invest in minorities across this country," Johnson said. "They should have the same retailers and quality service as people who live in the suburbs."

The City Heights neighborhood is the most ethnically diverse in San Diego County, according to the 2000 census.

The retail center is part of an eight-block redevelopment district to provide new homes, businesses, parks, a library and other amenities for the neighborhood.

One cornerstone of the businesses Johnson helps develop is that they hire people from the community. Fifteen City Heights residents, or about three-quarters of the store's workers, live in the neighborhood, said Wendy Hope of the City Heights Community Development Corp.
Kim Pung is one of them. The 19-year-old grew up in City Heights.

"I've seen this place growing into a better neighborhood," Pung said. "There are more opportunities for teens to have a job."

Another is Janie Hanesana, 18 and a premed student at San Diego State University.

"If my car breaks down, I'm only a 10- to 15-minute walk to work," said Hanesana, who graduated from Hoover High in June.

Democratic Assemblywoman Christine Kehoe, City Councilwoman Toni Atkins, Urban Village developer William Jones and representatives of Mayor Dick Murphy's office feted Johnson with proclamations and exultations.

Nearly 100 people, including 3-year-old Isaiah Vasquez, waited in line for Magic to autograph T-shirts, basketballs and other items. Isaiah passed the time bouncing a basketball while Johnson gave media interviews inside the Starbucks.

"I grew up in a community like this, back in Lansing (Mich.)," Johnson said. "You had to go across town to get a salad or coffee. As I grew older, I started seeing the same thing in cities across the country. I want to help these communities grow. But it also makes good business sense."

Johnson said he has no regrets about giving up basketball and enjoys his second career in business. He said he plans to open a theater, restaurants -- including TGI Friday's and Fat Burger -- and a 24-Hour Fitness Magic Club in San Diego, a city where he often vacations with his family.

Caption: 1 PIC
Former basketball superstar Earvin "Magic" Johnson greeted City Heights residents at the grand opening of the Starbucks there. Laura Embry / Union-Tribune
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