

San Diego's melting pot: City Heights area has most racial diversity of any place in county

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It seems somewhat incongruous to see Hazel Rutherford perusing the market's meat counter.

That's because Rutherford is black, and the Vien Dong Supermarket in City Heights caters primarily to the neighborhood's many Vietnamese residents.

Yet it is a sign of the diversity of our times.

It didn't feel odd for Rutherford, who has lived in the neighborhood for the 10 years since she moved from the East Coast.

"I like this community," she said as the butcher handed her five freshly cut, boneless chicken breasts in a plastic bag. "My kids are exposed to different cultures. They have friends from different backgrounds, from the Philippines and China."

Census numbers released last week confirm what Rutherford has grown accustomed to: that the City Heights neighborhood of San Diego has the most people from different racial backgrounds of any place in the county. Pockets of Chollas View, Encanto and Paradise Hills also rate high on the diversity scale created by USA Today to measure the chances residents have of bumping into someone different from them.

But even in this ethnic melting pot, the Latino population is fast displacing whites and blacks, just as it is in the rest of the city and across the state.

Non-Hispanic whites still hold the majority in the county, though no ethnic group holds a majority in the city of San Diego. Whites make up 49 percent of the city's residents, followed by Latinos at 25 percent, whose numbers in the city increased by more than one-third since the 1990 census.

Asians increased to 13 percent of the city's population, while the population of blacks declined to 8 percent.

The American Indian population in the city decreased by 16 percent.

And even as the city's population becomes more diverse, its neighborhoods remain largely segregated.

In San Diego, whites predominate in coastal areas from Point Loma to La Jolla and inland from Mission Valley to Scripps Ranch. The exceptions are the Asian majorities in

Mira Mesa and Linda Vista, areas that also have high concentrations of Latinos.

Neighborhoods in the south and southeastern parts of the city -- where Latinos, blacks and Asians together outnumber whites -- were relatively unchanged in the last decade.

City Heights has been called San Diego's crossroads because of its location in the middle of the city. Development began in the westerly portion around the turn of the century, when an electric street railway was extended out along University Avenue.

Affordable housing initially fueled diversity in City Heights, said City Councilwoman Toni Atkins, whose District 3 covers the western portion of the community.

"Once new immigrants settled in City Heights, it became more of a social support structure," Atkins said. "They really wanted to be with familiar roots, and services grew up for these communities."

It remains a mecca for recent immigrants, such as the Somalis who fled their war-torn country in large numbers over the past eight years, said Abdi Mohamoud, executive director of the Horn of Africa Community, a nonprofit group that works with East African refugees.

Many groups of immigrants begin their American life in City Heights, and then move away as they become more prosperous.

"You have income ability, regardless of ethnicities," Mohamoud said. "There is a certain class of people, when they pass that threshold of poverty, they move on."

The Trans, an extended family that owns the Vien Dong market where Rutherford was shopping, are one American success story.

The family arrived from Vietnam in 1979, the year the United States introduced the "orderly departure program" through which refugees were allowed to emigrate rather than sneak out of the country. They came with nothing but the clothes they wore and \$25 from the government.

The Tran family bought Vien Dong 17 years ago. They now own seven stores in San Diego and Los Angeles, said 24-year-old Vu Tran, who manages the City Heights store with his brother, Nicholas.

"Before all the Asians moved in, the African-Americans and Mexican-Americans (shopped here)," Vu Tran said. "In the '80s the Asians moved in, and now the Asians are moving out."

While most of their clientele is Vietnamese, patrons of the store include Latinos, Laotians, Jews and Russians, said Nicholas Tran, who now lives in Del Mar.

Most come in for the fresh fish and meat, but the stock in the store reflects the diversity of its shoppers: durian, a sweet fruit from Thailand; fresh coconut and bitter melon favored by Chinese, Vietnamese and Filipinos; and chayote, a gourd popular with both Asians and Latinos.

Over the decades, the evolving ethnic character of the neighborhood has intriguingly been cast on the cafeteria walls at Hoover High School on El Cajon Boulevard.

Almost all the best athletes pictured from the 1930s and 1940s were white. By the 1970s, the honorees included many black faces. And a decade later, the top students in sports run the gamut from whites and blacks to Asians and Latinos.

As the dismissal bell rang at 2:35 p.m., hordes of students poured out of the school. Three Somali girls stood by the flagpole in traditional long dresses and head coverings called hijab.

Nearby, 17-year-old junior Joanna Rivera, whose father is Latino and mother is Latino and white, stood with a group of friends.

"For the most part, we get along," she said. "If you grow up in a neighborhood like this one, it's less likely you grow up to be a racist."

City Heights is a community where Pepe's Produce sits in the same strip mall as Hong's Oriental Massage. Casa de la Pinata, where owner Ernestina Diaz from Michoacan sells her handmade pinatas, sits blocks from the Wienerschnitzel, home of the pretzel-bun dog.

A short distance from Vien Dong, in a corner of City Heights on 52nd Street and Rex Avenue, workmen were repainting a Buddhist temple for the Cambodian New Year festivities beginning next week.

A "Thank You for Not Smoking" sign is posted in 11 languages inside the temple, which was a Christian church until nine years ago.

As Deng Phaisy covered the graffiti on a wall of the house across the street, where nine monks sat inside on mats for their midmorning meal, Ofelia Rodriguez struggled up the hill carrying a newly purchased mop.

She moved to the neighborhood a decade ago from Guatemala.

"Shopping is hard for me, as I don't drive," Rodriguez said. "But two or three times a day, trucks come by with everything we need -- fruits, groceries, tortillas. . . . I live very happy."

Joe and Mildred Berardini have lived near what is now the Buddhist temple for 52 years. Their son, Joe Berardini, was born there and grew up in a predominantly white

neighborhood.

Buddhist monk Khamphan Keobounruang hurried toward the bus stop for his English as a Second Language classes at the Mid-City Continuation Adult Center. Another monk, Khlok Leang, said City Heights has more people from different racial backgrounds than any other place in the county. Leang hurried after his fellow monk because Keobounruang had forgotten his dictionary.

A few miles away, Peggy Coleman, who is black, took a break from work at her continuation center job and talked about her neighborhood at 52nd and Rex. She's worried that as the area becomes more attractive, "people who were here when it was nothing" will get pushed out.

Already her landlord, who is Russian-born, has raised the rent on her two-bedroom apartment.

Councilwoman Atkins agrees it is a challenge in City Heights .

"As we revitalize, (we must) try not to price people out of their neighborhoods over and above what is naturally happening," she said. "The diversity is a real positive thing, and the rest of the city has to catch up."

The people of the city of San Diego

Year ... White ... Latino ... Asian ... Black ... American Indian ... Other... Multi-race*

1990 ... 59% ... 21% ... 11% ... 9% ... 0.5% ... 0.2% ... NA

2000 ... 49% ... 25% ... 13% ... 8% ... 0.3% ... 0.3% ... 4%

* In 2000 people were able to check off more than one race on their census forms

NOTE: Figures may not add up to 100% because of rounding

Caption: 2 PICS 1 MAP 1 CHART

1. Khlok Leang, a Cambodian Buddhist monk, walked up the hill toward his temple on 52nd Street near University Avenue in City Heights after delivering a dictionary to a fellow monk who is taking English as a Second Language classes. 2. Diverse districts -- The neighborhood of City Heights in central San Diego is the most diverse area of the county, with the most people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Census numbers revealed Asians increased in certain neighborhoods, the black population declined as a percentage of the city's populace and Latinos increased across the board. (B-1:1,7; B-2:2,6) 3. The people of the city of San Diego (B-6:7; B-4:1; B-2:2,6) 4. Students of various ethnicities walked past the world map adorning the Weingart- City Heights Library on Fairmount Avenue in City Heights . (B-4:1) 1,4. Laura Embry / Union-Tribune 2,3. SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, Data analysis by DAVID WASHBURN / Union-Tribune

Memo: Head varies

Map varies

For chart see end of text.

Edition: 1,2,6,7

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*Index Terms: ETHNICITY ; GROWTH ; IMMIGRATION ; NEIGHBORHOODS ;
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