At reclaimed City Heights park, dealers are out, kids are in

San Diego Union-Tribune - Friday, August 7, 1992
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Children frolicked yesterday in a City Heights park on 44th Street that was once controlled by drug dealers.

The peaceful scene also included more than a dozen young men playing basketball, while another group passed a soccer ball. Youngsters played in a large sandy area, riding swings and climbing over other outdoor equipment.

And more than 200 adults -- including area residents, police officers and security guards in black fatigues, black berets and black boots -- mingled, many of them eating hot dogs grilled on a barbecue by San Diego Police Capt. Mike Tyler.

"Four months ago, people were too afraid to bring their families out here even during daylight," said Councilman John Hartley. "Today, we have seniors, young families, kids playing in a city park ...this is the first major step toward reclaiming our parks, our city from the criminal element....

"Where families thrive, gang members cannot operate."

The key to reclaiming the park is an active core of neighborhood volunteers who are combining forces with city police, city recreation personnel, Hartley's staff and the security guards from C.J. Enterprises.

"I hope to use this City Heights park as a hub, a base from which this sort of combined effort can move out from the center, one block at a time, reclaiming the city from drug dealers and prostitutes ...no one element here today can do it by themselves, but together, we have a chance," said Hartley, who went door to door seeking volunteers after a slaying in the park five months ago.

At that time, the City Heights area -- bordered on the west by Interstate 805, on the north by El Cajon Boulevard, on the east by Euclid Street and on the south by state Route 94 -- was so dangerous that Hartley's law-enforcement committee refused to gather near the park for meetings.

Carol Seneff, chairwoman of that committee, said members now meet in City Heights. "I have seven children," she said. "And this is what we've been working so hard to achieve ...we know we're not finished, but isn't this wonderful."

"I feel safe here today," said Carlos Delamonte, who lives nearby. "A few months ago, the drug dealers controlled it ...I would never bring them here," he said, pointing toward his sister and her daughter.
Today, volunteers will begin painting and furnishing a police storefront on Highland Avenue, and C.J. Enterprises security personnel will move into another vacated house on Wightman Street, less than 100 yards from the park.

They will work closely with police patrolling the park and nearby area. At the same time, three separate city gang counseling and diversion programs will kick off within days, said Hartley.

Meanwhile, volunteer Linda Pennington will attack area graffiti. And volunteer Ray Gomez directs a swimming program that has grown from 10 youngsters two months ago to 170 this week.

Caption: 1 PIC
Park talk: Andre Benson of the C.J. Enterprises security guards chats with Karen and Tim Manley. Union-Tribune / JOHN R. McCUTCHEN
Memo: Head varies
Editions vary
Edition: 1,2,3,4,5
Section: LOCAL
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Index Terms: CITY ; CRIME ; POLICE ; PREVENTION ; RECREATION ; SECURITY ; YOUTH
Record Number: UTS1012443

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