

City Heights: Starting over to get a life, save a city

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In City Heights, at the rotting core of "America's finest city," John Madigan is a fresh-faced Irish cop out of a Jimmy Stewart movie.

As a San Diego police captain deep in harm's way, he has put his law degree aside to help save City Heights from flaming into a Watts or Hunter's Point, with its crime and misery flowing across neighborhood lines into Kensington or even Mission Hills.

Within its 700 desperate blocks along a plateau at the center of the city live more than 160,000 people of 30 ethnic groups. They are notably transient. Violent crime occurs at twice the citywide rate. One in three of the city's search warrants are served here. Gangs and drugs abound; street dealers come home to City Heights to sleep.

Yet Madigan's sky-blue Mid-City Division Station has unbarred windows, a community meeting hall, and a front counter that is host to a procession of misery. An incongruous new landmark at Fairmount and Landis, it's meant to open up law enforcement and community governance.

"This station," Madigan says, "used to have security walls up to the sky."

But now committed San Diegans, in and out of City Hall, are building a test platform for coping with our 21st-century melting pot.

It excites nationwide interest. The battle for cities hinges on audacious experiments. Candidates for governor and senator flock to Madigan's station hoping for photo opportunities.

"We brief them, but no cameras," Madigan said. "We haven't found all the answers yet. Crime in City Heights is down, but not enough."

He knows that salvaging a shattered neighborhood requires long years of patience and education as well as money.

"In three years Sol and Helen Price and their foundation have done amazing things here," he says. "But you take redevelopment money -- hell, you could build the Taj Mahal here and still fail."

A visitor witnesses profound social crisis before he can get past Madigan's officer at the front desk. One day last week a woman ran screaming into the station, pursued by a man, and turned and sprayed him with Mace. Police cleared the room for a while and then took her complaint.

As I arrived a young Hispanic woman reached the front desk. She pleaded softly with a fair-haired officer. The pain in his face could not have been faked.

"Who is this stealing your money to buy these drugs?" he asked.

"My mother," she whispered.

By the time my turn came I had an inkling of Madigan's strategy in City Heights .

"You're a wonderful listener," I told the officer.

He stared back unsmiling.

"I'm tired," he said.

Madigan and William Jones, a former city councilman who built this police station, introduced volunteer senior patrols that are going house to house to learn about families and build neighborhood watches. "Get to the kids," Madigan says, "and parents will come along."

"The city building here before was a beat-up old church," Jones said. "The sanctuary became a gym. It was a fortress. I told the police task force, 'If you want to build this headquarters without windows, I don't want to be part of it.' They found ways to make it secure and open both."

It's a symbol of a City Heights future. Its open style is copied in a new Central Division headquarters at Imperial and 25th, where ground was broken on Thursday. This newer station has touches of the old neo-Spanish station at the foot of Market Street. It's on the site of the old welfare office, a landmark in inner-city drug wars. After a father walking his son in Memorial Park was killed three years ago, residents marched on City Hall to demand a police station.

"I could be in City Heights for the rest of my career," Madigan says. "I hope so. I'm damned if we're going to lose this whole central San Diego plateau to crime."

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