In a city where railing against city hall has become a pastime, Capt. John Madigan of City Heights is one of 3,000 reasons that you hear so little grumbling about the men and women who drive the black-and-whites. On my first visit to his sparkling new Mid-City police substation, something nibbled at my memory.

This station stands at Fairmount and Landis, across from a massive civic square where outside funding (the Price Foundation and others) and neighborhood sweat and toil are creating a picture-book town center.

It's intended as a beacon of civitas. It beams the message of law and order, of a free society and self-esteem to a transient community. Within it live people of 30 ethnic groups from Ethiopia and Somalia, Cambodia and Laos, and around the world.

Many have had no chance to observe such government, and even fewer to become a part of it. Some are criminals who commute to work outside City Heights. Within these 350 blocks the major crime rate is twice the city average.

"What was here before on the site of this station?" I asked Madigan.

"A Vons," he said, and then I remembered a tense night that began in that Vons parking lot.

I was writing columns about street gangs, drive-by shootings, and the work of wonderfully funny and courageous police men and women who dressed in the clothes of these streets and tried to talk its languages. One night I rode with a drug gang detail. Six cars met in the Vons parking lot for briefing before going in on a bust.

The sergeant warned, "You're at the center of the worst crime area in San Diego."

Armed with search warrants and firepower, the police forced their way into drug houses that bore all the signs of chaos and despair that we have come to associate with drug abuse. There was evidence everywhere, but not the gang leader that the police sought. Nobody on either side got shot that night. Police handcuffed and led away several suspects. They took down some other names. Nothing made the papers.

"We just keep hammering away," Madigan says of the work of his 219-officer force now in the Mid-City division. That night was just one more hard tap.

But the barricaded and barred Vons we used as rendezvous point that night has been replaced by Madigan's sky-blue Mid-City substation. It has open doors and windows,
patient front-desk officers and a meeting room for any group that wants to talk about saving the neighborhood.

William Jones, a former San Diego city councilman, recalls that Vons supermarket. For good reason, the Vons people abandoned it.

But these days Jones, CEO of CityLink Investment Corp., is lead developer of the City Heights renewal, and he's cheered that two supermarket chains are interested in opening a new store within the civic center across from the Mid-City station.

"Did you pitch Vons?" I asked him.

He smiled.

"I was pleasantly surprised, given their history on this site," he said. "They spent a day listening and looking. They know this neighborhood is on its way now."

As construction is completed in the year ahead on various elements of the City Heights community center, City Heights will make more of the kind of good news its residents yearn for.

One dream already working is the Rosa Parks Elementary School.

"This is one we all put our arms around," says Jones. "The Prices put in millions, and Rosa Parks got part of it. The principal was hired 18 months ago, and immediately involved the parents in the school curriculum. We challenged Bertha Pendleton and her colleagues to make this the most state-of-the-art school in the region. As a result Rosa Parks was oversubscribed by 225 percent for this opening year."

In City Heights, they welcome that kind of crowding.

NEIL MORGAN'S column appears Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays.

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