Old friends fight to save neighborhood at city's core

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On Memorial Day, Karen Manley and her husband, Timothy, took a chocolate cake decorated with American flags and went for dinner at the home of their City Heights neighbors, Hoa Van Tran and his wife, Lee.

Lee served five Vietnamese courses. Then Hoa went outside and cut a sugar cane. He chopped it into pieces and showed his guests how to suck out the sweet. Here in San Diego’s toughest neighborhood, they swapped recipes and talked about the kids. When she and Hoa had arrived in City Heights 13 years ago, only those kids spoke English.

Countless volunteer residents like Karen Manley struggle to rescue City Heights from an urban disintegration unsuspected by most San Diegans. Their spunk and ingenuity attract national attention and strong allies, like Helen and Robert Price and their Price Foundation.

Karen Manley believes things are getting better. She finally feels safe walking home alone at night after chairing meetings of the activist town council.

"We want to stay," she says. "There are about 30 ethnic groups. I've never known another community where you can get to know people from all around the world without leaving home."

Police Capt. John Madigan knows he could spend the rest of his career in City Heights stemming the tide. But, he says, "I'm damned if we're going to lose this whole central San Diego plateau."

City Heights encompasses about 350 inner blocks south of I-8, east of I-805, north of state Highway 94 and west of 70th St. It is at the center of a 700-block region served by Madigan and 219 officers from a strangely welcoming Mid-City substation at Fairmount and Landis.

Over their holiday dinner, as sometimes happens when the Manleys and Trans meet, the Vietnam War came up and was put aside. Timothy and Hoa were both in that one, on the same side. Hoa paid for it with hard years in Hanoi-mandated re-education camps.

The United States thanked Hoa by admitting him and his family. Hoa has a night maintenance job at San Diego State. He comes home at 6 each morning as Lee gets the youngest of their seven children ready for school and goes to work as manicurist at a salon off University Avenue. Two children already in college hope to become architect and physician.
Karen and Timothy grew up in Scranton, Pa. She came west with him to Camp Pendleton during the Vietnam War.

"We loved San Diego so much we decided to settle here after the war," she remembers. "I was 18 then."

Their two children, now grown, graduated from Hoover High. They bought their home in City Heights 12 years ago. Timothy is a service supervisor for Jackson & Blanc. When she is not busy with volunteering, she does seasonal tax work for H&R Block. Recently, she escorted Hoa to one of her projects, the neighborhood housing service, to talk about buying their first home.

It is an urgent dream here to stabilize a transient population through home ownership. Volunteers mobilize to brighten their somber social landscape. Their efforts, through a proudly democratic town council, reward attentive schooling, neighborhood watch, and crime-free commercial buildings.

Neither Manleys nor Trans underestimate the challenge. Violent crime occurs at twice the citywide rate. One in three of the city's search warrants are served here. Gangs and drugs abound; for years the drug underground recommended City Heights as a hassle-free place to make a buy.

"Part of our problem," Karen says, "is that the criminal actually lives in our neighborhood."

Madigan's officers fight to prevent blight from leapfrogging into Kensington or even Mission Hills.

"We just keep hammering it," says Madigan. "And it's absolutely impossible without community support."

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