

New Heights

Urban Village project is transforming blighted area

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Karen Manley gazed up with pride at the two-story building she and a core group of activists had fought so hard for.

She admired the combination of teal blue, rusty red and gray they'd picked out. Such unlikely colors for a police station. But so pretty.

She felt a powerful, warm feeling flow through her. It came on so strong she started crying.

If they could accomplish this, they could accomplish anything.

Everyone she'd ever known from her neighborhood was at the grand opening ceremony, hundreds of people who never thought this day would come, all dressed in their best suits and dresses.

After years of broken promises, they all looked so happy on that sunny St. Patrick's Day morning in 1996. The police officers were smiling too -- and with good reason.

City Heights had some of the worst crime statistics in all of San Diego for quite some time, and people were scared to go outside at night.

Manley's home had been broken into, authorities had captured two felons two doors down, and a man was shot and killed on the sidewalk in front of her house. When she and her teen-age daughters walked to the bank on El Cajon Boulevard, they were constantly harassed by men looking for prostitutes.

Just having the new police station there made Manley and her neighbors feel safer.

But this was just the beginning.

In the next few years, the surrounding area saw a sweeping transformation as the Urban Village took shape. And those changes are still continuing.

Launched in 1994, this \$100 million publicly and privately funded redevelopment project is San Diego's largest since Ernest Hahn's \$140 million Horton Plaza in the early 1980s.

After the police station went up, an elementary school, a swimming pool and tennis courts, a library, a theater and a community center also became part of the landscape. An adult community education center is scheduled to open later this year.

In the final phase, two blocks of homes and businesses will be torn down as early as November to make way for a shopping center with a Lucky supermarket and a Sav-on pharmacy. Maybe even a video store and a coffeehouse.

Developer William Jones has served as the engine for the project and philanthropist Sol Price has acted as the fuel, pumping in more than \$10 million.

The two men want to make this area a model for urban revitalization, to prove to the public and private sectors that blighted neighborhoods like this one can be turned around.

They believe if residents can take pride in their community, get good jobs and purchase homes there, send their children to local schools and buy goods from local businesses, then their quality of life will improve.

For Price and Jones, a crucial factor has been to give residents a chance to help plan the Urban Village and to keep them involved there as volunteers. They hope residents will feel a sense of ownership in their new village and their newfound safety, and that will help maintain them into the next century.

The Urban Village is a social experiment still in progress, so results can be measured more in emotional than numerical terms at this point.

The project seems to be meeting its goals so far, but no one can predict the future. Even its creators acknowledge they can't guarantee that the Urban Village will ultimately achieve success.

Jones, 43, has had his heart set on saving inner-city neighborhoods ever since he was a teen-ager.

He grew up in Logan Heights, Lincoln Park and then Skyline, where he watched his parents' community change for the worse as growth occurred north of Interstate 8, pulling tax dollars out of the inner city.

Jones became even more educated on the topic of urban decay by San Diego Councilman Leon Williams, whom he started working for in high school in 1972. That's how he met Price, a fellow Democrat who made his millions building retail warehouse centers such as the former Price Club.

Jones succeeded Williams in his City Council seat and left politics five years later to earn a master's degree in business from Harvard University, so he could start his own real estate development company.

During the five years he managed commercial real estate portfolios for Prudential Investment Corp., he never lost his dream of finding "a way to right a wrong" and turning around neighborhoods like his parents'.

He continued to discuss his ideas with Price and finally left a high-paying job to team up with him in 1993. Together they formed CityLink Investment Corp. to carry out their vision for a redevelopment project in the inner city.

They traveled to Washington, D.C.; Newark, N.J.; Cleveland, Ohio; and South-Central Los Angeles, visiting other developers' attempts at urban renewal. Then they searched for the right neighborhood in San Diego.

Initially they focused on communities in southeastern San Diego, but they shifted their focus to City Heights in early 1994. Almost by accident.

It all started Jan. 8, when the Vons supermarket on Fairmount Avenue closed its doors for good.

Community activists and longtime customers gathered that Saturday morning in the store's parking lot for a mock burial for one of only two supermarkets in the community. Two major convenience stores and a bank had already left the area within the past year.

Jones and Price each saw a story in The San Diego Union-Tribune about the Vons closing that weekend and brought the article to a meeting at Price's office that Monday.

The two drove over to City Heights to look around, deciding this could be a good place to start.

As they researched the area, they found it not only had one of the city's highest crime rates, but also schools with some of the city's highest student turnover rates, and more parents on welfare than in most areas of San Diego.

This was and still is San Diego's most ethnically diverse community, with more than 30 languages spoken there. In 1998, only 19 percent of the 65,000 people who lived within a mile of the Urban Village owned their own homes.

When Price and Jones inquired whether the Vons building was up for sale, they learned that the city had already expressed interest in buying it for a police station.

The two men, who had envisioned a new supermarket, persuaded city officials to hold off for several months so they could do more study and determine what the residents wanted. They were a little surprised at the results.

In early 1994, Jones called Manley and two dozen other resident activists and asked if they'd be interested in helping him save their community. Since these residents had already been trying to do this in small ways of their own -- pulling tons of trash out of canyons, repainting houses and joining forces with community policing efforts -- they jumped at the chance.

Price paid the initial \$80,000 to hire architect Tony Cutri to draft the Urban Village master plan, and the community meetings began.

At one of the first meetings, Cutri, Jones and a core group of 25 residents sat in a circle of folding chairs at a nursery, looking out on trees and flowers. For three hours they ate pizza, drank soda and were so engrossed in discussion that they didn't even notice the sky had turned dark.

The residents described their concerns, their fears, their hopes and their dreams for their neighborhood's future.

They wanted to be able to park their cars and walk a couple of blocks without being accosted or having their cars stolen or broken into.

They wanted to sleep without hearing gunshots or the rumbling of police helicopters overhead.

They wanted a grocery store that was modern, with fresh meat and produce and clean floors.

And they wanted a school close enough for their children to walk to, so they wouldn't have to get on a bus and ride across town.

"In other words, taking the streets back," said Cutri, who lives two miles from the Urban Village and takes his 2-year-old son to the new library.

Cutri went in worried that these meetings would not be productive, that the residents' hopes would be unrealistic. But he soon realized that along with the wonderful energy in the room, there was an immense amount of hope and optimism, and a healthy dose of skepticism as well.

"These people were extremely intelligent, were extremely realistic, had been around the block a few times," he said.

Hearing how determined they all were, Cutri thought, "These people are going to do it."

At the end of the study period, Price and Jones agreed with city officials that crime was foremost on everyone's mind.

A police station it would be.

That spring, Councilwoman Christine Kehoe accepted an invitation for an official tour of the Mid-City Continuing Education Center.

Inside the run-down building, she saw classrooms crowded with recent immigrants and

exotic women wearing black floor-length robes, head coverings and veils. For her, the student body was "a total reflection of what's going on in City Heights."

The center offers free classes morning, noon and night. Students are taught English, computer skills and how to pass the American citizenship test. A banner that reads "Anything Is Possible, Follow Your DREAMS" hangs in the lobby.

"I was so bowled over by the dedication of the staff," Kehoe said. The center "was just alive with potential."

After her tour, Kehoe decided these people needed a better facility and more classroom space. They deserved it. Why not make a new adult education center part of the Urban Village ?

Kehoe called Jones, with whom she'd recently had lunch to discuss the project . She'd loved the concept and had promised to help him any way she could.

Jones not only bought Kehoe's idea, he went on to negotiate with San Diego Community College District officials to make it happen.

The new three-story building will go up at Fairmount and Wightman Street, where construction workers have already dug a hole 12 feet deep for an underground parking garage. The center will have 26 classrooms, eight computer labs and a large library. Most courses from the Mid-City center will be relocated there.

Since June 1994, Kehoe has shepherded more than 30 separate actions worth about \$45 million for the Urban Village through the City Council.

"I really believe in this one," she said. "It's the best thing I think I've ever done as a council member."

In October 1994, Jones wandered into the City Heights recreation center, an old church building that had been turned into a hand-me-down gym. It was dark and dingy and smelled musty -- like dirty socks.

A group of small boys was slumped against the wall with long faces.

"Why are you so unhappy?" Jones asked them.

They pointed to the burly young men who were playing basketball on the less-than-regulation-size court and were not about to give it up to pipsqueaks.

"They won't let us play."

Given the size of the basketball players, Jones didn't want to intercede, so he took the boys outside and told them about what he had planned for their neighborhood.

"What is architecture?" they asked.

He pointed to where he was going to put the library, the tennis courts and the pool.

"You mean we could swim?" they asked, though in their eyes Jones could see that they really didn't believe it.

He pointed to the old Vons supermarket and showed them where the police station was going to go. That's when he got the idea of putting a gymnasium in the same building.

"At that moment,," Jones said. "I realized I was totally, 100, 200 percent committed to developing this Village project ."

Construction of Rosa Parks Elementary School started in February 1996. Thanks to funding from Price, Emilee Watts started her job as principal 1 1(1)2 years before it opened. Her first office was a closet at Wilson Middle School.

In November, Watts moved into the contractor's trailer on a dirt area that is now a parking lot. She wore a hard hat outside and occasionally lost a low-heeled pump to the mud.

One day a woman came up and asked if she was the principal. Watts felt so proud she got teary-eyed.

"Are you sad?" the woman asked.

"No," Watts said. "I cry when I'm happy and when I'm sad."

The bulldozers and tractors rumbled as Watts planned the curriculum, hired teachers, met with parents and community members. One day the wind blew the dust around so much that by noon she couldn't see out the windows.

She also found time to tour city parks and libraries by bus with the group of residents that helped plan similar facilities for the Urban Village .

Finally, a big Opening Day ceremony was set for Sept. 2, 1997.

Watts and her staff stayed until 10 the night before, moving furniture and waxing floors. Watts went home for a few hours' sleep and was back at 4 a.m., a nervous wreck but very, very excited.

She hung balloons and banners, checked all her lists and went over the speech she would make to parents, teachers, children and local dignitaries.

By 6 a.m., 100 kids had already arrived with their parents, two hours before the 7:55

a.m. start.

Built for 1,000 students, Rosa Parks was immediately overenrolled when 1,150 showed up for class.

Watts gave her emotional speech, then visited each classroom to tell students how lucky they were to have a new school. She told them that everyone would follow the rules, get along, have fun and work hard. She expected them to do the best they could.

"It was just a perfect, perfect day," Watts said.

Today the school has 1,468 students, 1,050 of whom speak little or no English. The five kindergarten classrooms are doubled up and some first- and second-grade classes are meeting in a large multipurpose room, separated by a row of tables and benches standing on end.

Watts is waiting to hear from Superintendent Alan Bersin on whether Rosa Parks will be the first school in the 140,000-student district to be able to cap its enrollment.

For some, these were good times and bad times. The city had to clear the area of dilapidated homes, apartment buildings and businesses to make way for the library, community center and recreation complex. That meant St. Mark's Episcopal Church had to go as well.

The city spent \$3.8 million to buy 28 parcels along Fairmount and 44th Street and \$350,000 more to relocate all the people who lived and worked there.

St. Mark's white cinder-block church had been built to replace the original building more than 30 years earlier. In one form or another, St. Mark's had been on the corner of Fairmount and Wightman since 1915.

"Even though people were pretty poor, they were a community, a community under siege," said Richard Thomson, a senior church warden who'd already left the area because of the crime problem.

Many people didn't want to move, he said, but the idea of "enlivening the neighborhood was so noble" that most supported the project.

In Thomson's view, the city made a statement by tearing down the church. He took that as an insult. "I really felt we were being pushed out of the neighborhood as trash was being cleaned out," he said.

Other church officials didn't take it quite that hard.

"We were disappointed," said the Rev. Louis Levinson, 70, who retired a year after the church was demolished in late 1996. "From our point of view, any village needs a

church, and we wanted to be the church."

After being offered \$573,000 for all the church property, St. Mark's filed legal papers and settled out of court with the city for \$828,000, said Levinson.

But Levinson said that still wasn't enough money to build a new church in a timely manner. So, the congregation ended up relocating a few blocks down Fairmount in a space formerly used by a Thai restaurant.

St. Mark's new brochures read: "Welcome to St. Mark's City Heights Episcopal Church. The city moved us ... and we kept moving!"

Along with a new church building, the congregation got a new pastor, the Rev. M.A. "Mac" Collins, who has decided to use the move as an opportunity to help the church evolve along with the neighborhood.

Similar to the meetings Jones held, Collins called community leaders together to discuss what programs they would like to see at St. Mark's.

As a result, Collins will start classes in June, teaching adults how to write, speak and read in English and in their own languages. Children will be offered courses in music, art and culture.

"We're on a journey with the people of this community," Collins said.

It's just before 6 p.m., Dec. 17, 1998, and Rosa Parks Elementary is hopping.

Deborah Bolanos, 34, is running between two rooms, carrying a large container for mixing fruit punch. She goes back for foam cups, cookies and napkins.

Once the monthly parent meeting starts, she will translate for the Spanish speakers.

"I'm already tired, and we haven't even started," says the single mother of four, who is also a member of the City Heights Town Council.

Bolanos was up at 6 that morning to make her kids breakfast. She kissed her 13-year-old daughter goodbye and walked her three younger children to Rosa Parks, where she works part time in the parent room.

Mothers who used to be scared to leave their houses have found a safe haven in that room, where they gather mornings to do the kind of classroom preparations that teachers don't have time for. They also learn how to use computers so they can help their children with homework.

They happily put in thousands of hours of "sweat equity" each year, which Sol Price required as a return on his investment.

While Bolanos' boss, Rosario Iannacone, teaches about 30 men and women how to be better parents in one room, a dozen residents next door talk to community police and code-enforcement officers about problems in the neighborhood.

In a third room, leaders of the local Vietnamese community plan their Feb. 16 New Year's celebration.

Iannacone explains how parents should read to their children. Later, she hands out suggestions how to monitor programs their kids watch on television.

"Make sure there are some rules. What shows are appropriate? Sit down and watch with them," says Iannacone, 29.

Next door, a man complains to a police sergeant about cars and trucks parked on the front lawn of a house on his street. He says there's another house where he thinks they're selling marijuana. Motorists pull up, go inside for a few minutes, then drive away.

Another man says a bunch of cars are parked on a vacant lot and that a guy is conducting an illegal auto repair business out of his garage.

"We really don't want tow trucks pulling up to residential neighborhoods," says one of the officers.

Every resident has something to report.

"We appreciate these meetings and can see our neighborhood is cleaned up," says Bob Sergent, who lives with his wife on Isla Vista Drive. "You guys are doing a tremendous job."

Mary Frances Dixon moved to her parents' neighborhood on 44th Street nine years ago to wean herself off cocaine and hard liquor.

For years, she rarely left her dark apartment or passed through the locked front gate. There was the temptation of drug dealers in the park and the danger of drive-by shootings and robbers on the street.

But that all began to change once the new buildings started going up several years ago.

Dixon and her mother used to sit in her parents' bedroom, in the apartment complex across the street from her own, to see how the area was evolving.

"We watched it come up," she said, tearing up at the memory of her mother, who died last Thanksgiving. "It was such a really big change in the neighborhood. They have so many things you can do. Like the swimming pool. I can't swim, but it seems like a nice thing for the kids to do instead of getting wet in the front yard."

Her mother didn't think they'd have to move, but Dixon knew better. "I said, 'Momma, they're not going to jump over your building.'"

Her father lives alone now in the apartment building across from the new library, and it is going to come down to make way for the shopping center. So is the 14-unit complex that Dixon manages nearby, and where she baby-sits grandchildren, nephews and nieces for a living.

But unlike her father, who still hears his wife walking around his apartment, Dixon isn't upset.

She's looking at this as a chance to make some of her own life changes. She's going to get out of town and visit relatives in Louisiana for a while.

"Then if I come back, I'm going to get a job, a real job," she said. "I'm just sitting here, wasting away. I want to see what other people are doing."

The Urban Village may be well on its way, but Sol Price isn't celebrating its achievements. Yet. Yes, the school, the police station, the swimming pool and the library are up and running, but how can anyone measure the project's performance before it's finished?

"I don't see any evidence yet that it's worked," Price, 83, said at the Price Entities office in La Jolla, which handles his business and charitable activities.

And how, he asked, can you tell if it's going to meet its goals?

Price, a businessman always concerned about the bottom line, is still looking for a way to measure the Urban Village's success. He will only go so far as to say the project seems to be making positive changes in the neighborhood and "a substantial impact on the general attitude toward City Heights."

Price is no longer a partner with Jones in the for-profit CityLink Investment Corp., opting to provide only charitable donations to the project.

Sometimes he drops in at Rosa Parks to read books to students. "He's checking on his investment, and he truly loves children," said Michael Sprague, City Heights Town Council president.

But here's the rub as Price sees it: If the project does too well, the problem of saving one poor community could be solved only to create another one a few miles away.

If Jones improves the community too much with the new shopping center and renovated houses, Price fears "we're going to fail because the property is going to be too expensive, so the poor people will have to move someplace else. That's the dilemma."

Jim Cahill, executive vice president of Price Entities, said they have plans to keep that from happening.

They want to try to improve the quantity and quality of jobs for residents, to increase the number of affordable houses and apartments, and to provide public or private health services equal to those available in any other community in San Diego.

But there are no proven answers when it comes to this type of development. "There's just so many interacting forces here," Cahill said. "I don't think you're ever going to say: 'Yes, we're done. Yes, we're successful.'"

"It's one heck of a social experiment."

Urban Village by the numbers:

Percentage of owner-occupied units within one mile of the project : 19

Percentage of households in the same area in 1996 with less than \$15,000 income: 30

Volunteers at Rosa Parks Elementary School during the 1997-98 school year: 225 parents for 21,171 hours

Volunteers at Rosa Parks during the 1998-99 school year through January: 155 parents for 11,171 hours

Homes painted in in 1998 in City Heights by resident volunteers: 100

People who logged onto the Internet at the new library in November, 1998, the first month it was open: 4,726

Library cards issued that month: 600 to children, 400 to adults

Library cards issued in January 1998 at old library: 101 to children, 157 to adults

Money spent in 1998 by City Heights Town Council to obtain 88 restraining orders against prostitutes on El Cajon Boulevard and University Avenue: \$1,000

Tons of trash picked up by resident clean-up groups in 1998 from canyons, alleys, streets in City Heights: 400

Percentage crime dropped between 1995 and 1998 in the census tract area surrounding the Urban Village : 30.1

Percentage crime dropped in all of City Heights in the same period: 21.7

Percentage crime dropped throughout the city of San Diego in the same period: 16.7

Sources: City of San Diego, San Diego Police Department, City Heights Town Council, Weingart library staff, Rosa Parks Elementary School.

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