Families resisting gangs: Neighborhood walkers mark who owns Teralta Park in City Heights
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Author: Amy Oakes

They walk for an hour, a few days a week, around Teralta Neighborhood Park to send a message.

This City Heights recreation area belongs to the community. It wasn't built for the gangs and delinquents who scare neighborhood children away, bust lamps and vandalize the grounds.

"We want everyone to know that the park is for families, not gangs," said Maria Cortez, who helped organize the walking patrol. "It should be a place for kids to play instead of on the streets."

The walking patrol, known as the Metro Mile, consists of a mix of residents and those who work in City Heights. Joyce Brown, a resident service coordinator at the nearby Metro Villas, brings children from the affordable housing complex.

Brown started the program late last year, upset that children weren't using the park across the street. She said she noticed a lot of them sitting around the complex during the holidays.

"They told me the gangs told them they couldn't come to the park," she said.

Brown called Cortez, president of the Teralta West Neighborhood Alliance. The two came up with an inexpensive way to get the community involved and increase visibility in the park.

They talked to community groups and nearby residents about joining the effort. Ten to 15 take part in each walk.

Delia Robinson said she takes part in the walks to help out. When she moved next to the park in March, she said, she noticed a lot of trash and candy wrappers littering the grounds.

"I like to do something for the community," she said.

To stand out, the organizers wear pastel green City Heights T-shirts. The shirts attracted some not so nice comments in the early days.

Teralta Neighborhood Park opened in April 2002, when Interstate 15's "missing link" was completed through City Heights. The unique 5-acre site was built on a "lid" over
the freeway.

With its grass fields, half basketball courts, walkways, playground and picnic areas, the park seemed perfect for City Heights.

But Cortez said she and others were resistant.

"We didn't want the park because the gangs would take over," Cortez said.

And that's what happened. Soon, people stopped going, out of fear.

Police say there have been gang fights, assaults, robberies and rowdy behavior. At a community meeting in January, a girl told police she was too afraid to go there and asked for their help.

From Jan. 1 to July 30, there have been 12 reported assaults in the general area, according to police records. That's just as many as last year's total, and four less than in 2004.

And not all assaults are reported.

Officer Steve Rosenbloom said the city's Park and Recreation Department wants to put surveillance cameras in the park within a few months. The Mid-City Division recently installed two cameras at the City Heights park as a test.

Rosenbloom, who oversees the camera system, said so far the cameras have been used in about 16 arrests.

"They are still working great," he said.

Cortez said the cameras would help make the park safer, even though she knows some people are concerned about privacy rights. To her, she said, it's more important to make Teralta family friendly.

Cortez, who has lived in City Heights for 30 years, and Brown, who works for the City Heights Community Development Corp., are looking for other ways to improve the park.

"We're doing the best we can," Cortez said, adding that a community cleanup is scheduled for Thursday.

The walks, they say, are having an impact.

They have seen less vandalism, and residents have told them they feel safer having picnics or playing in the field. The walks stopped in June because of the heat and when they resumed, Cortez said, she noticed some broken lamps and graffiti.
On a recent afternoon, Cortez looked around the park and pointed out kids playing soccer, families cooking food at the picnic tables and people sitting in the grass.

"This is what we wanted to see," she said. "The people out here."

Caption: 3 PICS 1 MAP
1. Children walked in Teralta Neighborhood Park yesterday as part of an effort to reclaim the area for families. The park in City Heights had been the domain of gangs until adults formed the Metro Mile patrol. 2. Preparing to distribute fliers yesterday to announce a cleanup Thursday of the Teralta Neighborhood Park were Maria Cortez (left), Joyce Brown and Abdi Osman. 3. (Teralta Neighborhood Park) 4. Joyce Brown (left) and other adults led a group of youngsters on a lap around Teralta Neighborhood Park yesterday. At least four days a week the Metro Mile walk is made. 1,2,4. Earnie Grafton / Union-Tribune photos 3. AARON STECKELBERG / Union-Tribune, SOURCE: ESRI, TeleAtlas
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