After years of struggling against graffiti, neglect and urban blight, the mid-city neighborhood of Azalea Park is making a dramatic comeback.

Built along twisting canyons a mile and a half east of Balboa Park, the community is in the midst of a home-improvement renaissance. Armed with paint, spackle, elbow grease and imagination, homeowners are reclaiming the area one house at a time.

It took more than civic pride to bring the area back from the brink, however. Longtime residents credit a highly unusual home-marketing strategy with sparking the revival in 1993.

Employing a neighborhood restoration plan that may be unprecedented nationally, residents began promoting Azalea Park as a place for gays and lesbians to live. They believed that gay homeowners would restore their properties and provide a ready source of labor for community projects.

They were right.

Over the years, the ongoing outreach has attracted more than 100 gay households to the community of about 900 apartments and houses. Although Azalea Park remains predominantly "straight" or nongay, gays and lesbians have become the backbone of the revival. The success of the effort is reflected in rising property values and a renewed suburban ambience.

The outreach originated with Linda Pennington, a longtime area activist. The artist arrived with her husband Mark in 1981. She formed Project CLEAN, a group that tidied up alleys and removed graffiti throughout City Heights, a district three miles northeast of downtown that includes Azalea Park.

Pennington remained dissatisfied with Azalea Park's ramshackle houses and the absence of trees along public thoroughfares, however. With some homes dating back to the 1920s, the area was showing its age. Adding to her frustration was a shortage of volunteers to accomplish the neighborhood makeover she envisioned. "I needed that infusion of people with talent and enthusiasm and vision."

An epiphany came when Pennington recalled the care that gays and lesbians had lavished on homes when she lived in nearby Hillcrest. She convinced fellow activists that Azalea Park would turn around if more gay people moved there. The first step was entering a float in Hillcrest's annual Pride Parade. They made their welcoming attitude
and low home prices the cornerstones of the campaign.

Azaleans who marched in the parade carried signs bearing such messages as "Canyon Homes Under $100,000" and "Gays Welcome." They followed up by attending the Pride Festival in Balboa Park, passing out informational flyers and organizing neighborhood tours.

The Pride Parade remains "one of our biggest organizing tools," said Thom Turner, president of the Azalea Park Neighborhood Association.

"We call it an underground real-estate market," he told a group of land-use planners during a recent tour. "We have an e-mail list of people who are interested in rentals or homes for sale."

The neighborhood association touts the area's diversity and its acceptance of gays and lesbians on its Web site, www.azaleapark.org. The site displays the colors of the rainbow flag, a symbol of gay pride.

Azalea Park's acceptance of gays and lesbians doesn't mean it's exclusionary, Turner stressed. Everyone is welcome, he added. "It's for anyone who wants to live in a nice community."

Although gays constituted a majority of home buyers for a time after the outreach began, that no longer is the case, said Anne Christensen, a real estate agent who has been active in the neighborhood.

Wesley Combs, a Washington, D.C.-based consultant, has built a career on marketing products to lesbian and gay consumers. He says Azalea Park's outreach is "fascinating" and possibly unprecedented. Combs, who counts Ford Motor Co. and American Airlines among his clients, can't cite another predominately straight neighborhood that has organized to recruit lesbian and gay residents.

**Active volunteers**

"I have never heard of that, where they have recruited gay people to come in because they have an affinity toward gentrification," he said.

Organized by Pennington, gays have helped restore Azalea Park's image through cleanup drives, tree plantings and landscaping parties. Volunteers have mounted an aggressive code enforcement campaign, working closely with the city to rid the area of front-yard debris and abandoned automobiles.

Nearly a decade after the outreach began, Azalea Park is a different place, Pennington said.

"They have made it happen," she said of her gay neighbors. "I was definitely spinning
my wheels without them."

Although home prices have risen dramatically in recent years, as they have throughout San Diego County, the area still boasts some of the region's best real estate bargains, Pennington said. You'll no longer find canyon-view homes for under $100,000, but houses still sell well below the countywide median, which hit $349,000 in November.

"It is still the best buy for what you are getting," Pennington said. "We are finding people who thought they could never buy a house. We have made a lot of dreams come true."

A cultural mosaic

One reason for Azalea Park's ready acceptance of gays and lesbians may be the neighborhood's demographics. Located about three miles south of Qualcomm Stadium on Interstate 15, the City Heights area is one of the most ethnically diverse sections of the city. You can hear more than 20 languages spoken along its streets. People who move there step into a cultural mosaic.

Neighborhood activist Vicki Davis, 44, bought her three-bedroom home for $88,000 in 1992. She planned to fix it up and sell it for a quick profit, but the area grew on her. Her neighbor Patti Sanders lives in a house her parents purchased in 1948. Longtime Azaleans have adjusted to the changing cultural landscape, she said.

No one complains about gay newcomers "because they are good people," Sanders said. "It is not a prejudicial neighborhood."

Organizational meetings "are mixed," she added. "It isn't all gays and lesbians. There are married people, there are single people, but everyone has one interest in mind: keeping the neighborhood safe and clean. It makes you feel guilty if you are not involved."

Don't ask, don't care

Tom Lashbrook and Larry May, a gay couple from San Francisco, arrived two and a half years ago. They have purchased several homes in the neighborhood. Lashbrook, 49, is a teacher. May, 50, focuses on home-improvement projects. On a recent sunny day, the couple was greeting neighbors and tending their garden.

"We know our neighbors are watching out for us, and not just our gay neighbors," Lashbrook said. "Our straight neighbors are fabulous. Our Hispanic neighbors are great. I can't think of anyone we have had a problem with. The thing I like best is I can stand out my front door and name every single person all the way down the street."

One of those people is Dessie Sprague, a resident for nearly 40 years. At age 85, she remains an active volunteer. Sprague said home improvements began to change the character of Azalea Park about five years ago. Gay neighbors have fit in seamlessly,
"That is the nice part of this community," she said. "I don't even think of a person as gay or not. I don't ask because I don't care."

Davis said the strength of Azalea Park lies in the willingness of residents to accept people who are different from themselves.

"Our motto on our floats used to be 'the fastest growing gay community on the planet,' " Davis said. "A lot of straight couples have been instrumental in our success. We have changed our motto to 'the fastest growing gay-friendly neighborhood on the planet.' We are not just looking for gay people. We are looking for people who share our philosophy of being good neighbors."

Turner agreed. "It's unique, it's accepting and its in San Diego," he said. "It is just a beautiful place to live."

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Caption: 3 PICS 1 MAP
1. Tom Lashbrook (right) and Larry May relax in the back yard of their Azalea Park residence. The couple has purchased several houses in the mid-city neighborhood. 2. On the upturn -- Located within City Heights, the Azalea Park neighborhood is a collection of approximately 900 houses and apartment units west of Fairmount Avenue, between Manzanita Canyon and Hollywood Park. 3. Neighbors Tom Lashbrook and Patti Sanders share a passion for community improvement. Lashbrook moved to Azalea Park about two and a half years ago. Sanders lives in the home her parents purchased there in 1948. (I-4) 4. Dessie Sprague, a longtime Azalea Park resident, says newcomers like Larry May have helped improve community. At 85, Sprague remains an active neighborhood volunteer. (I-5) 1,3,4. Roni Galgano / Union-Tribune 2. SOURCE: Azalea Park Neighborhood Association, UNION-TRIBUNE

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