Signs of solidarity: In Azalea Park, neighborhood projects form a bond

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In Azalea Park, neighborhood projects form a bond

Azalea Park activist Tom Lashbrook smiled broadly as a dozen people pounded red slabs of clay into the shapes of animals, trees, faces, musical notes, cookies, stars and even slices of pizza.

"I love this project," said Lashbrook, a computer teacher who moved to the area about five years ago. "It's an amazing representation of the community. Creativity is far beyond anything that I expected. It's going to give the community an identity."

The group at the Azalea Park Recreation Center was making ceramic tiles for an ambitious community signage project. All residents in the Mid-City enclave of about 900 homes have been invited to take part in the effort, which was organized by volunteers. So far, more than 100 people have made trips to the recreation center to work under the supervision of artists who live in the neighborhood.

The youngest participant is an infant whose handprint was placed on a tile by his mother. The oldest is longtime resident Faye Rice, who recently turned 100.

Azalea Park is part of City Heights. Located about three miles south of Qualcomm Stadium on Interstate 15, City Heights is one of San Diego's most ethnically diverse areas. More than 20 languages are spoken along its streets.

In addition to creating community pride, the goal of the sign project is to help neighbors connect with each other. Invitational fliers have been printed in three languages: English, Spanish and Vietnamese.

"People have gone knocking on doors saying, 'Will you be a part of the project?' " Lashbrook said.

Working through the Azalea Park Neighborhood Association, volunteers have raised about $300,000 in community development block grants and redevelopment funds. The ceramic tile classes were funded through a $10,000 grant from the city of San Diego's Commission for Arts and Culture. The group hopes to complete the city's approval process and have the signs installed next summer.

Amateur artists have been given broad creative freedom, but all tiles must be sturdy enough to withstand the high-temperature ceramic firing process. Eventually, they will be glazed in bright colors and incorporated into mosaic patterns to decorate three
planned signs. The goal is to use enough tiles to give residents a sense of ownership.

Participants have been asked to bring "found objects," such as keys and machinery, to be incorporated into the decorations. Designer Harmon Nelson, who has created community signs in North Park and the Gaslamp Quarter, said the project will consist of structures at Fairmount Avenue and Poplar Street; at the west end of Poplar, within the local community park; and along Tulip Street, on a bridge that spans Interstate 805.

The sign at Poplar and Fairmount, as proposed, will be mounted on a street median and will include planters and landscaping.

The most elaborate structures will be at the community park. In addition to a sign, there will be a public seating area decorated with tiles.

"We are getting the city to approve our contracts for construction documents so that we can work out the last technical details," Nelson said. "The design is fairly well set."

Marlon Pangilinan, an associate planner for the city, said he expects no major alterations. "There could be some slight changes, but I believe the main intent and design of the project will still be there."

On each structure, the words "Azalea Park" will be suspended from a trellis. Each sign also will bear the words "celebration, participation, community and diversity," noted Liz Avalon, design committee chair for the neighborhood association.

"Those words are something we have built around," she said. "They came very early in the process."

The origins of the sign date back to community discussions in 1997, said Linda Pennington, a founding member of the neighborhood association. "We hope this is something that is going to stand as a monument for a very, very long time," said Pennington, an artist who is helping to coordinate the tile work under the city arts grant.

Working on the project "is a good way to get to know each other," said resident Vicki Leon, a glass artist and resident who is working on the project. "You have all these ages and cultures participating."

At a recent class, resident Ivory Shephard, a registered nurse, was making a tile in the shape of the sun. He said he looked forward to seeing it placed on a sign.

"People are vain," he said with a smile. "We like things we do on display, even though it may not be one of the greatest things in the world."

Nearby, Monica Lupercio, 12, was shaping clay into the image of a jack-o'-lantern. Eight-year-old Taylor Jenners was making cookies, a toothbrush "and a happy face."
"It's cool," Taylor said of the class.

Leon has a personal goal. She wants the project to spark interest in art. "I am hoping to see a few individuals have personal art awakenings," she said. "Some kids and adults may not even know that they have talent."

**Good things**

Centenarian Faye Rice recalled moving to Azalea Park in 1949, when many of the community's small houses had yet to be built.

"It has grown a lot," she said of the area. "A lot of good things happen in Azalea Park. I think it's a wonderful place to live."

Many residents have invested in home-remodeling projects in recent years. Azalea Park is making a comeback that traces its roots to the 1980s, when volunteers launched a series of neighborhood improvement efforts. In 1984, Pennington started Project CLEAN, a drive to remove debris from canyons and alleys. In the late 1980s, residents began doing nighttime walks to discourage crime, she recalled.

Established in 1985, the Azalea Park Neighborhood Association is a nonprofit organization operating under the umbrella of the **City Heights** Town Council. Its mission is to build relationships, serve the community and improve the lives of residents.

In 1993, an aggressive Neighborhood Watch program was mounted to reduce illegal drug dealing. Openly embracing its gay and lesbian community, civic leaders began promoting the neighborhood's real estate at Hillcrest's annual Pride Parade that same year.

Organizers said they were convinced that an influx of gay residents would lead to home improvements. They made a welcoming attitude and the community's low home prices the cornerstones of the campaign. Volunteers still enter floats in the yearly parade. Today, many gay residents are active in civic affairs.

**A symbol**

Today, several community gardens are tended on public land within the community. Volunteers work on numerous public events, remove graffiti, publish a newsletter and provide assistance to seniors. Avalon said the sign project is symbolic of the community's push to improve itself.

"It is an incredible community," said Avalon, a professional planner. "I have only been there a few years. I have watched my street transform. People are putting down roots and fixing up houses and really turning it into a great place to live. I am very excited about Azalea Park and its potential. It already is one of the great neighborhoods of San
"It's ours," Lashbrook said of the sign project. "Twenty years from now people will come back and say, `Look at what I did.' "

Community Solutions

To learn more: Information about the Azalea Park and the sign project is available on the Web at www.azaleapark.org.

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Caption: 4 PICS 1 MAP
1. A box holds some of the pieces of ornamentation designed by community members for the Azalea Park signage project. 2. An artist's rendering shows seats to be built in a community park around a wind chime stanchion decorated with tiles. 3. Neighborhood Association founding member Linda Pennington (standing) talked to longtime Azalea Park resident Faye Rice about her tile. Working on their tiles were Eduardo Contreras (left) and David Moreno. 4. Two-year-old Kenya Pineda worked on her tile, one of many to be used in a neighborhood sign project in Azalea Park. 5. Creating an identity -- 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. 1,2,3,4. Dan Trevan / Union-Tribune photos 5. SOURCE: Azalea Park Neighborhood Association, UNION-TRIBUNE
Memo: For information box see end of text. For map see microfilm.

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