East San Diego couple battle-hardened in war against drug breed

Evening Tribune - Monday, December 10, 1990
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A breed of scum deals for drugs and human flesh right in front of the place where Helen and Maurice Mizrahi live in East San Diego. The intruders throw their garbage into the street without a thought because they are accustomed to filth and squalor where they eat and sleep.

They run alongside moving vehicles, making drug transactions in broad daylight. They congregate in alleys and crawl spaces of buildings, leaving behind human waste and other debris.

Valery Dishert, a friend and next-door neighbor of the Mizrahis, tells of the time a dope peddler approached a customer at her graphic arts business and said straight-faced: "This is crack-in-the-box, may I take your order?" Such horror stories are endless.

The Mizrahis have coined nicknames for the dozen or more prostitutes who regularly hang around their door.

Another next-door neighbor, an auto repair shop, has regular break-ins. Thieves steal engine parts, stereo equipment and sets of tires from locked cars. All this despite a high chain-link fence topped with barbed wire.

But the Mizrahis and others like them want to be rid of the troublemakers. So at ages when they should be kicking back, enjoying the fruits of their labor, Helen and Maurice have become battle-hardened soldiers in a war to take back City Heights.

"It's incredible what we've let people do to us," Helen says angrily. "But I learned that we have power to change this the day I saw a little old lady shoo a dope addict from in front of my door by whacking (the addict) with her purse."

Not long ago, the Mizrahis tried to make anyone feel at home in their business-residence in the 4500 block of University Avenue. It was part of a tradition begun in 1974 when the seemingly unlikely pair first opened the coffee shop.

She's 68, somewhat introverted and of Kansas Christian stock. He is 83, gregarious and a Palestinian descendant from the settlement of Jaffa in Israel. From Helen, you get deep insights into spirituality and faith in the Almighty. From Maurice, vivid behind-the-scenes accounts of the Allied Army's exploits in the Libyan desert, where he served in the British Royal Air Force during World War II.

But the Mizrahi tradition was good for a time when people in the neighborhood went to sleep at night without fear of unlocked doors. Before the drug pushers and users,
panhandlers and prostitutes, break-in artists and robbers began to rule the streets.

Over the past five years, Helen and Maurice have grown more wary of strangers who pass through their doors. Without extensive scrutiny, they won't sit down and talk easily with just anyone. They suspect most people's motives. They lock up promptly at the end of a business day.

Decent folks can hardly walk anywhere in the City Heights neighborhood without the fear of being conned, propositioned or mugged. Some landowners can't sell or rent without first putting up iron bars and security fences. Most have installed high-beam lights that stay on through the night.

The atmosphere is killing a number of once-thriving businesses, including the small imported-coffee shop that Helen and Maurice run in their home. It has destroyed the neighborhood's sense of community.

The Mizrahis have worked for a year straight trying to draw attention to their situation. They've complained to City Hall, the mayor's office, the Police Department.

Finally last October, police made some moves. They established a hot line at their community relations office on Euclid Avenue. Through it, residents in the area can report suspected criminal activity and other problems directly to the storefront's staff.

The staff records the information and routes it to the appropriate city departments or police units for action. Within 16 days, the storefront can provide updates for callers on investigations related to their reports. The staff also makes recommendations on how to handle specific situations. Additionally, police have increased on-foot and mobile patrols in the area.

Helen and Maurice say determination like theirs is what's needed to help clean up scores of other streets and neighborhoods, the ones here and across the country that have gone to the dogs because of drugs and their related evils.

The Mizrahis sometimes feel trapped. But they agree that those who want to protect their neighborhoods must no longer sit in fear of the criminal element.

"If they are going to kill you for standing up," Helen says, "they can only kill you once."

Caption: 1 PIC
Helen and Maurice Mizrahi want peace in the crime-filled East San Diego neighborhood where they live and work Tribune photo by Nelvin Cepeda
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