Developing a dream: In City Heights, William Jones puts his ideals to the test

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The moving van has just pulled away, his fiancee and kids have gone ahead to San Diego, and William Jones is walking one last time through his empty house in Oakland.

Jones wonders whether he's done the right thing by uprooting his family and leaving a high-powered job in commercial real estate to follow his dream. Then he locks the door behind him.

There's no turning back now.

"I was walking into a very exciting but uncertain future," he said. "Whatever I did, it had to be successful. We had to prove what we were setting out to prove: that we could create a more wholesome, livable urban neighborhood."

That was the fall of 1993, and today he's well on his way to proving that his vision can be realized, using City Heights as the laboratory for this social experiment.

Known as the Urban Village, this 6.5-block, $100 million redevelopment project is the largest in San Diego since the $140 million Horton Plaza in the early 1980s.

There have been times during the last five years when the project has gotten bogged down in government bureaucracy, or when Jones was scared that it wasn't going to fly at all. Even now, he says, he's still not sure it's going to work.

But he has pushed on, working many seven-day weeks, selling his ideas day and night, nagging contractors, even suffering some health problems from all the stress. Worries about the project lowered his resistance; when his baby boy, Alex, got sick, so did he.

It's taken five years to finally get to the only money-making portion of the project, a 100,000-square-foot shopping center with a supermarket and drugstore, slated to open at the end of next year.

Jones, 43, acknowledges that his critics -- and even some of his friends -- say he can be too idealistic, and idealism doesn't put food on the table.

"I just hope that down the line he gets a couple of projects that make him some money," said Jim Cahill, head of Price Entities, which handles the business and charitable activities of Sol Price. Together, Price and Jones formulated the vision for the Urban Village.
Unlike most private developers, Jones runs his for-profit business, CityLink Investment Corp., with a not-for-profit attitude.

"If not for that attitude, he wouldn't have stuck with this project," said Michael Sprague, president of the City Heights Town Council.

San Diego City Councilwoman Christine Kehoe, whose district includes the Urban Village, said Jones has "the brains of a banker and the heart of a missionary." She calls Jones "a prize" because of his compassion, his wherewithal and his patience.

"William doesn't get the credit he deserves," she said.

To build the Urban Village, Jones had to tear down dozens of houses with sagging roofs and peeling paint, shabby apartment buildings and run-down businesses. St. Mark's Episcopal Church had to go, as well.

People living and working on two blocks with a similar landscape will be uprooted later this year, when buildings are demolished to make way for the new shopping center.

Even though some residents have been disgruntled at having to move, the community's overall reaction to the project seems to be quite positive.

For the first time in many years, residents can take pride in having new playing fields free of drug deals, freshly paved streets and sidewalks. Not to mention a new library with a fireplace and Internet access, a police station, a theater, a swimming pool and tennis courts.

Jones has kept the ball rolling so that the project hasn't lost its momentum, to ensure that the residents, who have seen so many promises broken, are not disappointed once again.

He had to persuade city officials to do business differently, to push through pieces of the project for faster permitting and payment to contractors than the city was used to.

In doing so, he has shown that several public agencies can cooperate with each other and the private sector, all the while challenging the stereotypes that people hold about inner-city neighborhoods.

"If I could do this one or two more times in my life, this is a contribution (where) I can say to myself and my family that I've done my best," said Jones.

Born in Dallas, Jones moved to San Diego when he was 2. He grew up in Logan Heights, Lincoln Park and Skyline Hills, where, in 1965, his parents were one of the first African-American families to buy a home.
Jones remembers having big plans and high ideals since he was about 8. It was soon after the assassination of John F. Kennedy that he decided to "fight for justice and fend for the rights of the less fortunate" later in life.

During his senior year at Morse High School in 1972, the principal called him into his office to tell him that City Councilman Leon Williams was interested in hiring an intern.

Jones, who was on his way to the University of California Los Angeles on a scholarship, wasn't all that interested. But his parents told him to get down to City Hall out of respect for the councilman.

It took only one meeting for Jones to "fall in love" with Leon Williams, the first African-American to be elected to the City Council.

Jones changed his plans; he decided to go to work for Williams and attend the University of San Diego on a scholarship. But he never lived the carefree life of a student. He was too busy getting grounded in public policy and the way cities can grow and decay.

His first job in Williams' office was to take complaints from people who claimed that they had been mistreated by police.

"He was basically helping this youngster get a grip on how the world worked," Jones said.

Over time, the councilman became a mentor and a second father to Jones.

The two of them discussed redeveloping the city's urban core even back then, in the early '70s, when tax dollars were going into new streets, schools and freeways north of Interstate 8.

"He was a very interesting, very intelligent, very curious high school student," Williams recalled. "He'd keep me down at the office sometimes until 9 o'clock at night, talking about things."

By 1978, Jones had worked his way up to become the youngest chief of staff in City Hall.

"Here comes Baby William down the hall," staffers used to say.

When Williams left the council to take a seat on the county Board of Supervisors in 1983, he asked Jones to continue the work he had started and serve out the remaining year of his term.

Jones agreed, then went on to be elected to a four-year term of his own. He wanted to go to graduate school in either law or business, but he didn't tell anyone because he
didn't want to be viewed as a lame duck.

"What concerned me when I was sitting on the council is I was always begging the private sector to reinvest in neighborhoods -- and almost always the answer was no," he recalled.

So he set his heart on finding a way to do it himself.

He applied to Harvard University's business school and was accepted.

Before he left town, Jones went to Sol Price's office to tell him about his plans. The two had met through Williams, and over time Price would also become a mentor.

Price was very supportive. He came around his desk, shook Jones' hand, and said, "You finally got smart."

Then Price, who made his millions in retail warehouse centers, gave Jones a few words of advice: "When you go to business school, you're going to become a very attractive target. I don't ever want you to be just a token for anything. You stay focused on what your heart tells you to do."

Jones went to Harvard a single father, taking his daughter Lia with him. Now 19, Lia Jones attends the University of Maryland at College Park.

After graduation -- and after talking it over with Price -- he joined Prudential Investment Corp. in New Jersey. Homesick for San Diego, Jones agreed to spend a year on the East Coast, on the condition that he could return to California and run his own investment portfolio.

Prudential agreed and transferred him a year later to its San Francisco office, where he managed a $400 million portfolio of trophy properties with international investors.

Jones found the most enjoyment in turning around neglected properties that needed improvement. But they weren't in the kind of neighborhoods that he cared the most about.

He still had a nagging desire to return to his roots and solve the problem of urban decay, which had caused his parents' inner-city neighborhood to deteriorate around them.

"It's like this big vacuum cleaner that sucked up the jobs, sucked up the people with higher income and sucked up people with higher education," leaving problem schools, higher crime, weaker infrastructure, a drop in home ownership and an increase in the transient resident population, he said.

"It made me feel like my parents and their neighbors were victims," Jones said.
He and Price continued to discuss how to solve this problem until finally, Jones was ready to leave his high-paying job and take a chance at doing just that. Price has contributed more than $10 million toward the Urban Village so far.

Jones lives in Kensington with his wife, Deputy District Attorney Cheryl Suing-Jones, their son Alex, and Cheryl's 14-year-old daughter, Lauren.

Jones often thinks about what he wants to do after he finishes the Urban Village project.

Despite his background in public office, he doesn't want to return to local government. He's considered working with children -- becoming a teacher, perhaps -- or helping the community in some other way. He's addicted to learning new things.

"There's so much to do and not enough people to do it," he said. "Wanting to make a positive difference drives me more than anything else."

Williams said Jones still has a fire inside of him.

"He's still enthusiastic," said Williams. "He's not burned out, but sometimes he's a little sad about the sometimes non-caring nature of people, including political office-holders. If he succeeds, it's going to be a benefit to everybody, and some don't see that."

Caption: 4 PICS
1. Why is this man smiling? Developer William Jones, of CityLink Investment Corp., has waited a long time to see Urban Village come to life in City Heights. 2. Ready to go: Alex Jones, 3, hops out of his father's car at the City Heights library. The preschooler has grown right along with the dreams of his father, developer William Jones, for this neighborhood. 3. End of the story: Developer William Jones attempts to describe a yak in a book at the City Heights library to his son, Alex, 3. Alex grew up watching this building, the cornerstone of the Urban Village, as it took shape. (D-2) 4. Writing on the wall: Tiles on the City Heights library reflect the area's diversity. (D-2) 1,2,3,4. Staff photographs by Peggy Peattie

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