City Heights all dressed up, all but ignored
San Diego Union-Tribune - Tuesday, June 4, 1996
Author: PETER ROWE

On the Saturday, Sunday and Monday of Memorial Day weekend, picnickers at City Heights Park and Recreation Center ate, drank and trashed.

On Tuesday, William James scoured.

"Took out nine big sacks of garbage," said James, 42, a worker for the city's parks and recreation department. "I wanted to make sure there are no ugly spots."

On Wednesday morning, James put a fresh coat of paint on the park's concrete steps. He and his colleagues busily prettified City Heights, putting the best possible face on a neighborhood that -- let's be frank -- often wears a fright mask.

But locals wanted Sen. Bob Dole to see them at their best.

"I don't want to see a negative image go out of here," said LesPierres Streater, a director of the City Heights Community Development Corp. "Everybody knows about the crime and violence."

But who knows about the two new schools rising nearby? The swimming pool and tennis courts planned across the street? Plans for a new branch library? Or the police station that just opened?

"It takes a brave butt to sell drugs in this park now," James said. "The police are all over."

By noon, everything had been double-checked. The volume of Dole's microphone (120 decibels). The pepper tree behind Dole's platform (low branches were lopped off, giving Secret Service snipers a clear view of the terrain). The graffiti on neighboring houses (covered in city-issued paint, in the "Cottage White" shade).

City Heights looked sharp.

Then the national media showed up.

Say what?

By the time Dole hit City Heights, he had already spent his morning in Torrance, Long Beach and Redondo Beach. After City Heights, he toured the Convention Center -- site of August's GOP national convention -- then touched down in Sacramento and Chicago.
Maybe that's why the reporters weren't sure where they were.


Make that "a once drug-infested park in a low-income neighborhood here . . . " -- San Jose Mercury-News.

I'll go with the Mercury-News on this one. Waiting for the candidate to arrive, I saw basketball courts. Picnic benches. Swing sets. Jungle gym. Looked parklike to me.

But what do I know?

Dole spoke "standing in a field . . . " -- Knight-Ridder News Service.

You can just imagine what the area surrounding this crack market/park/field looked like. Or you could just read several accounts, and then take the multiple-choice quiz.

City Heights is . . .

A. "a working-class neighborhood . . . " -- Knight-Ridder.

B. "a largely Mexican barrio . . . " -- San Francisco Examiner.

C. " 'the ghetto.' " -- a local teen quoted by the AP.

Blind date

Streater disliked these descriptions -- and the candidate's speech, which only made passing reference to the neighborhood while stressing anti-drug themes.

"Doom and gloom was the real message from Dole," Streater said. "He didn't leave the community with hope."

A gussied-up City Heights eagerly awaited her political suitor, but this blind date was blind to her charms. City Heights ' would-be beau looked at her and saw drug smugglers (on the border), welfare chiselers (everywhere) and Democrats (in Washington).

"We understand the problems," Dole said, "we understand the people; we understand they want action."

Good. But if you seek to understand City Heights, senator, don't read your press clippings. Or you might believe that this is a Mexican ghetto with a crack dealer on every corner, and a politician in every field.