I knew where Michael Sprague's story was headed.

After all, he lives and works in City Heights, arguably San Diego's roughest neighborhood. Drive-bys, drugs, despair -- for urban blight, City Heights offers convenient one-stop shopping!

One evening, Sprague leaves the office and sees his car has been broken into.

Then he notices the burglar had . . .

Of course, I thought. In that hellhole, whaddaya expect?

I know Sprague's story. I know City Heights.

But what I know is wrong.

**Smart money**

City Heights is surrounded by I-805 (to the west), El Cajon Boulevard (north), 54th Street and Euclid Avenue (east), Highway 94 (south) and ugly realities (all sides). Its 2,000 acres shelter 75,000 people, many of them newly arrived from Cambodia, Somalia, Guatemala and a few dozen other countries.

Sprague, whose ponytail hints at his American Indian heritage, relishes the mega-multicultural ambience. But as City Heights Town Council president, he admits his area's woes are lethally obvious. In 1995, your chances of being murdered here were triple your chances citywide; of being raped, double; of having your home burglarized, double.

Schools are crowded. Parks, small. Hopes, fragile.

"About six, almost seven years ago now, a group of residents got together and said things are going wrong and we don't see them getting better," Sprague said. "We went to the city."

In that first meeting, the residents who were later dubbed "The Partnership" made one surprising comment:

San Diego didn't need to spend more on City Heights. It needed to spend smarter.
"This was crucial," Sprague said. "When we said, 'We think the money is about right,' we were not looked at as the typical whiners."

William Jones, the Harvard-trained former city councilman who runs CityLink Investment Corp., is no whine connoisseur. Neither is philanthropist Sol Price. They agreed to underwrite a master plan for City Heights, but the agreement came with one long string attached.

"Sol really does demand -- in a very positive way -- sweat for his money," Sprague said. "He knows if the community does not help, it will not truly appreciate this."

The community got to work. And something wonderful started to build.

**Back to life**

This is not just a local story. Today in Washington, D.C., two nonprofit groups -- the Center for National Policy and the Local Initiatives Support Coalition -- will issue a joint paper, "Life in the City." The upbeat report outlines campaigns to repair tattered urban pockets, in cities from Los Angeles to Philadelphia.

". . . Increasingly effective local organizations are succeeding where earlier attempts failed," the report notes, "and are bringing devastated areas back to life."

In City Heights, crime rates started falling after residents lobbied City Hall for a police substation that now inhabits half of an abandoned supermarket on Fairmount Avenue. The other half? A gym, where officers play locals.

Across the street, a tennis and swimming-pool complex and a Price-funded branch library are slated. Nearby, Rosa Parks Elementary and Monroe Clark Middle School are rising. Both will open in September, but the schools' spectacular architecture already has won applause for the design team -- one-third of whom are residents.

Neighborhoods change when people's actions and attitudes change. While I marveled at City Heights' new buildings, I marveled even more at the fate of Sprague's car.

"Someone broke in," he says, "and put my Club on the steering wheel."

And I thought I knew where this City Heights story was headed.