Price was right: Documentary focuses on driving force behind City Heights renewal

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Author: Roger M. Showley

A collaborative effort by citizens and public agencies to redevelop the City Heights neighborhood of San Diego will be featured as a segment of a four-part public television series, "California and the American Dream," that will debut this week.

Produced by former San Diegan Paul Espinosa, the hour-long City Heights program is scheduled to air at 10 p.m. April 20 on KPBS-TV. Titled "The Price of Renewal," it tracks the role of San Diego discount retailer Sol Price, founder of the Price Club (now Costco) chain, as a philanthropic force who was able to help turn the blighted community into a vibrant urban village.

"It was a major effort to address some of the problems of a poorer inner-city community and try to transform that," said Espinosa, now based in Phoenix.

The opening program of the series, at 10 p.m. Thursday, is called "California's 'Lost' Tribes." It covers the rise in American Indian gambling enterprises and carries another San Diego connection through the county's standing as a mecca for Indian-owned casinos.

On April 27, "The New Los Angeles" looks at that city's demographic transformation in which a new majority of ethnic and immigrant groups, including African-Americans, Hispanics, Asians and others, are learning to live together.

The final program on May 4, "Ripe for Change," deals with contrasting facets of California's agricultural story -- the abundance of food and the rise of obesity and the growth of organic farming and health-conscious diets.

Having spent 25 years in San Diego, Espinosa selected the City Heights story as a good example of urban revitalization carried out as a public-private partnership.

The area, located generally south of El Cajon Boulevard and east of Interstate 15, had descended into a crime-ridden blighted community by the time Price, who turned 90 in January, selected it as a place in 1994 where he could have an impact.

"I decided I wasn't going to be able to change the country and I wasn't going to be able to change the state," he told Espinosa on tape in a rare on-camera interview in the summer of 2004. "I had come to the conclusion that I wasn't going to be able to change the city, so maybe I could change only a little area."

Investment in city
How City Heights went from a den of crime to a model community redevelopment, with as much as $110 million invested so far by Price, is told through several voices besides Price's. One is Jack McGrory, who left his post as San Diego city manager to run Price's firm, Price Enterprises, a real estate company. He currently is a manager of the Price Group, a real estate and investments concern, and a director of Price Charities. McGrory has figured in the news recently because of his ties to the city's pension fund problems.

The other leading player is William Jones, a former City Council member, who left politics to get an MBA at Harvard University and returned to San Diego to become a developer. With Price's help, Jones founded CityLink Investment Corp., a for-profit development company active in City Heights and other locations. Several community leaders and academics also are featured prominently.

So far, the City Heights Urban Village project has resulted in a new police station, school, library, recreational facilities, housing and shopping, with a new home in the works for La Maestra Community Health Centers.

For Espinosa, the City Heights story demonstrates that a nongovernmental entity can overcome bureaucratic roadblocks and achieve vast improvements in a neighborhood.

His report touches on the displacement of former residents who have left the area because they could no longer afford the rising rents charged by landlords near the urban village. But he acknowledged he did not have time to delve deeply into that unintended consequence of neighborhood improvement.

"You're taking on a story for a national audience; not that much is known -- people don't know the story," he said.

**Money well-spent**

Price seemed to recognize the pitfalls when he was asked on tape whether he would do City Heights again, knowing how complicated the project became.

"Would I do it again?" he asked himself with a laugh. "I'd change some things. On the whole, I think we have spent a lot of money, put a lot of time in. I'm not sure we could have spent the money any better any place else. I think we've done a lot of good for a lot of people."

The four-part series is a co-production of Espinosa and two other executive producers, Lyn Goldfarb and Jed Riffe, and Independent Television Service. Curriculum and viewers' guides are being prepared and a Web site on the programs is active, www.californiadreamseries.org. Espinosa said he had a much bigger series in mind about 10 years ago, when he and his fellow documentary producers wanted to do 10 hours on California history that would have run during 2000, the 150th anniversary of
statehood. But they could not raise the $5 million necessary and decided on a scaled-down project dealing with contemporary issues.

The program name represents something of a play on the name of a seven-book history series, "Americans and the California Dream," by former state librarian Kevin Starr.

"The basic idea is California is a window into the future of America," Espinosa said, "though I think Americans really resist that idea. There's a tremendous amount of people who love California and hate California."

That attitude spilled over into the filmmakers' difficulty in fundraising. Out of a $1.9 million budget, they received only $20,000 from a California source, the California Council for the Humanities.

Espinosa said that lack of local funding from companies and foundations goes back to the idea that many Californians are uninterested in the state's past since so many of them came from somewhere else.

"They don't really know the history of the region or the state and in some cases they don't want to know it," he said. "It is, in a way, sort of profoundly ignorant of itself."

Caption: 3 PICS
1. Paul Espinosa (right) conducted an interview in a City Heights market for his segment in the "California and the American Dream" series, debuting this week on public television stations. 2. At Tortilleria Lily, a neighborhood fixture, workers kept up a fast pace. 3. Sol Price 1,2. Kevin Walsh / ITVS photos

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