

## Ethnic harmony reaches a peak in the small world of diverse City Heights

Evening Tribune - Wednesday, November 20, 1991

*Author: Mark T. Sullivan*

The exotic melody of life in City Heights plays out against a world-beat rhythm.

Young mothers from El Salvador wheel their babies down 43rd Street, while Vietnamese cafe owners pour heady French-press coffee for their patrons on University Avenue.

Over on Fairmount Avenue, an Albanian miner -- just weeks out of a refugee camp -- points in wonder at the palm trees.

And in a crowded classroom, a shy Somali woman draws a veil of blue batik cloth across her mouth as she practices her first halting words of English with a hill tribesman from Laos.

By anecdote and number, this neighborhood is San Diego's most ethnically and racially varied.

City Heights is gritty, crowded, crime-ridden and poor. But perhaps more than any other area of San Diego, this midcity neighborhood is a mosaic of race, color and creed, where tolerance, not bigotry, is the norm.

It is a community of dozens of cultures loosely bound by institutions that respect and celebrate diversity.

"Asking about race and human relations here is like asking about life," says Kimiko Fukuda, principal of Wilson International Academy, which serves as a middle school for the community. "This whole place is about human relations."

Says Luis Herrera, a library executive who has lived in the neighborhood for three years: "It represents what California and the United States is all about."

The area around Wilson is about 36 percent Hispanic, 24 percent white, 18 percent black and 17 percent Asian. But those four categories don't begin to describe the disparate cultures represented here.

Many people come because of the cheap rents and easy access to public transportation. Others are placed by refugee organizations. Still others are attracted by the shops and services that cater to their cultures.

Amanda Trang helps run her family's seafood market at 4143 University Ave., in a strip

mall where almost all business is conducted in both English and Vietnamese.

Inside, two Mexican-American workers use fishnets to snag catfish swimming in a huge tank in the corner. The Chinese customer buying the fish claps his hands and laughs when the fish thrash about and push a wave out of the tank and onto the floor.

Trang giggles, then grows more serious when asked why so many Southeast Asian businesses have located in City Heights .

"I guess it's because Orientals love to be in a group," she says. "They don't like to be isolated."

Two doors down, amid the aromas of spices that waft through the popular Vietnamese restaurant Pho Bolsa, customer Cam Trong Nguyen nods.

"All the signs and the cafes and restaurants, it gives us the feeling of being home, gives us the impression of the lifestyle we used to have in Vietnam," he says.

Like Trang, Pho Bolsa's owner, Tiem Nguyen, says 60 percent of his customers are Southeast Asian.

"The older people stick within their own community," Nguyen says. "But the youngsters don't have so much of a problem with the other races. We maintain separate cultures, but all get along."

Even the police who are so often a presence in City Heights say race is rarely an issue in the everyday violence that plagues the low-income neighborhood.

"It seems that everyone we deal with out there is tolerant," says Sgt. Ray Armstrong, who directs the San Diego Police Department's community storefront program. "There are gangs and it's a tough neighborhood, but suspects and victims are across the board. I can't think of one incident you'd call a hate crime."

Rico Lawrence, a longtime City Heights resident who is black, explained the neighborhood's race relations after shopping at the Vons store on Fairmount: "I don't think race contributes to the problems up here. It's like, if you owe me money, it doesn't matter that you're Hispanic or Asian or black or what, you owe me."

As vicious as crime is in City Heights , residents say, it's almost entirely a function of economics.

"I think racial tension, if it's going to happen, is going to happen later, once people are settled," says Zara Marselian, executive director of La Maestra, a community-service organization on Fairmount that offers medical and language services to refugees.

"Many of the people who come to this community are scraping by just to find jobs and

get a roof over their heads," Marselian said. "They don't have time to criticize."

There is, to be sure, a small but perceptible resentment among some about the way the community has been transformed into the city's racial melting pot.

Mary Beach has owned "Hairstyles By Mary" at 43rd Street and University for more than 20 years. She's white and she doesn't like the growing ethnicity in the area.

"They (Asians) have come in and taken over our businesses and I don't think that should happen," Beach says. "Worse, they're very clannish. They stick to their own and don't patronize our stores."

Still, such sentiments are rare in City Heights . Most business owners and community leaders welcome the diversity.

Rev. Michael Ratajczak, pastor of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Catholic Church on Marlborough Avenue, thinks that recognizing and celebrating the differences is a way of bridging the gaps between the cultures.

Priests at his church say Mass in English, Spanish and Vietnamese. And they plan to add a Mass for Ethiopian immigrants in their native language.

"But the thing I try to stress is that we are one parish, even though we are composed of many cultures," says Ratajczak. "We can all do this together if we respect our differences."

"I think there are less incidents of racial intolerance here because almost everyone who lives here is from somewhere else. We're all somehow strangers ... so there isn't time to notice the differences."

Dan O'Neil, the principal of the parish's school, takes it a step further. "Many of the people who live here now are refugees and came from places filled with strife. They wanted to leave that. They look to avoid conflict."

But Roberta Feinberg, executive director of the Mid-City Community Clinic, knows that operating in a multicultural arena can be tough.

The clinic at 4290 Polk Ave. offers medical services in eight languages: French, Thai, Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, Vietnamese, Spanish and English.

"And now we are getting Russians, Poles and Afghanis," Feinberg says. "You are on the front lines here. When there's an upheaval in the world, it causes a refugee flood. They land in the United States and two weeks after they arrive they're out in my waiting room."

On a recent day, Haile Tesfagiorgis, in the United States only four months from

Ethiopia, sat in the crowded waiting room with his sons, Robel and Amanuel.

Robel had a bad case of bronchitis because of exposure to tuberculosis in an East African refugee camp. Slowly and carefully, Dr. Ann Marie Truscello explained everything in simple English while she examined Robel.

Feinberg says all the doctors and nurses serving the more than 18,000 patients who troop through the clinic each year are highly sensitized to the needs of the community.

"We try to deliver culturally appropriate health care," Feinberg says. "Among the Cambodians, for example, there's a great deal of emphasis on herbs. But we practice Western medicine.

"We let them use their herbs, but go out into the different cultures and talk to the elders about the need to use drugs such as penicillin."

Feinberg has medical aides who are fluent in the different languages and cultures.

"We try to hire in the cultures we treat," Feinberg says. "The less barriers to medical access, the better."

That attitude of openness is apparent all over City Heights . The branch library, for example, offers children's programs for the Vietnamese midautumn festival as well as for Cinco de Mayo.

At Wilson school, the physical-education classes include cross-cultural dance lessons.

That's just one of the many changes Fukuda has instituted to reduce racial tension at Wilson, where 17 languages are spoken among the 1,700 students.

"Five years ago there was a lot of conflict here," Fukuda says. "Lots of fights among groups. Today we don't have ethnic students traveling in packs. The racial tension has drained away."

Among the reasons for the changes: an international-studies program for all students; hard discussions by faculty on the reasons minority males were the most-often suspended; and a radical shift in the way physical-education classes were conducted.

"When I arrived, kids from the different ethnic groups were allowed to pick their coaches for phys ed," Fukuda recalls. "It was totally segregated. I was stunned."

Today, physical-education classes are fully integrated, with children from Eastern Europe dancing with refugees from Central America.

"Playing together makes a difference in relations on and off the field," Fukuda says.

So does speaking a common language.

Every morning and evening a stream of refugees and immigrants from Poland, the Sudan, Zaire, Guatemala, Laos -- and many other countries -- courses into the La Maestra center to learn English.

"If there's a refugee coming to this city, chances are they are coming to this neighborhood," says Carlos Hanessian, who coordinates language and computer classes at the center. "And chances are they will be in these classrooms."

The lessons are free. But Hanessian says the refugees couldn't pay enough for some of the rewards, tangible and intangible, they receive by mixing and learning with other newcomers.

Here Issaq Ibrahim, an 18-year-old refugee from Somalia, practices the vocabulary of grocery stores with Bacil Chopov, a 37-year-old electrical engineer from Bulgaria; and with Chopov's wife, Tatiana.

"Most of the people we know in the neighborhood are Bulgarians like us," Tatiana says, smiling. "But we also meet others here, nice people from everywhere."

Something intangible. The basis of human relations.

Caption: 1 LOGO 5 PICS 1 MAP

1. A blending of cultures can be seen outside a community city in City Heights , an area bustling with an unprejudiced mix of race and color 2. INTERNATIONAL DISTRICT, This East San Diego area has become the city's melting pot, with dozens of ethnic groups and nationalities represented in one neighborhood. (A-8) 3,4. Students at Wilson Middle School take an international dance class from Allison Kendra. At right is Kimiko Fukuda, principle of the school, which is also called Woodrow Wilson Academy of International Studies. Opened in 1925 as a junior high, the school now concentrates on race and human relations. It is located in City Heights , San Diego's most ethnically and racially diverse community, "a mosaic of race, color and creed" and a place of cultural tolerance where poverty, not racial animosity, is the source of most problems. (A-9) 4,5. Amanuel Tesfagioris, left photo, amuses himself while his brother, Robel, awaits treatment by Dr. Ann Marie Truscello at the Mid-City Community Clinic, as Truscello and the boys' father, Haile, converse. The family recently immigrated from an East African refugee camp. More than 18,000 patients, many of them recent immigrants, use the clinic each year. Above, Tiem Nguyen, owner of Pho Bolsa Vietnamese restaurant, keeps busy in the kitchen. Many Southeast Asians who initially settled elsewhere in San Diego have moved to City Heights , clustering their shops and cafes in San Diego's new International District. (A-9) 1. Tribune photo by Don Kohlbauer 2. Source 1990 U.S. Census, Donnelly Marketing Information Services, Tribune 3,4,5,6. Tribune photos by Don Kohlbauer

*Edition: 1,2,3,4,5,6*

*Section: NEWS*

*Page: A-1*

*Column: SKIN DEEP Race and racism in San Diego: DEALING WITH DIVERSITY. One in a series.*

*Index Terms: ASIANS ; BEAUTY ; BLACKS ; BUSINESS ; CRIME ; CULTURE ; HEALTH ; HISPANICS ; HOSPITALS ; IMMIGRATION ; LANGUAGE ; LATIN AMERICA ; LIFESTYLES ; MEXICO ; NEIGHBORHOODS ; POVERTY ; RACE RELATIONS ; REFUGEES ; RELIGIONS ; RESTAURANTS ; SAN DIEGO ; SCHOOLS ; USSR ; YOUTH ; SERIES*

*Record Number: UTS0953309*

*Copyright 1991, 2007 Union-Tribune Publishing Co.*

*\*\*\*Reproduced with permission granted by San Diego Union-Tribune\*\*\**

*Full-text obtained via NewsBank*