

Colina Park neighbors work together; Community marches to improve area

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Colina del Sol residents have been working for months trying to unite others who have a desire to improve their City Heights neighborhood.

So when a core group of about three dozen volunteers heard about National Night Out, an event to help troubled communities reclaim their streets, they thought it would be a good way to energize the area, better known as Colina Park, or just plain Colina.

Trouble is, they decided to participate in July, just three weeks before the Aug. 5 event. There wasn't much time to pull people in.

"We would have been happy to have 15 or 50," said Sidney Michael, a retired Navy petty officer who has lived in Colina Park for more than a decade.

To everyone's shock, about 300 people crowded into Colina del Sol Community Park, the neighborhood's troubled center. Better yet, they stayed after dark, the time when residents usually avoid the park, for fear of gang violence and drug dealing.

"It's the first time I've ever seen a lot of people coming out," said Su Nguyen, who once had a gun pointed at his head outside Colina Park. "This means they care about the community a lot."

Though the success of the rally has taken on symbolic significance, the neighborhood's National Night Out event was just a small part of a larger vision that Michael, Nguyen and Amina Adan, one of the group leaders, hope will transform Colina Park into a safer, more hospitable community.

They also are consulting with a national nonprofit, the Local Initiatives Support Corp., as part of a program called Neighborhoods First. They plan to create a broad framework to improve safety, housing and employment within the boundaries of Euclid Avenue, 54th Street, El Cajon Boulevard and University Avenue, the streets that surround Colina Park.

At the core of the residents' dream is the park, an oasis by day, but a crime magnet by night.

The park sprawls from the golf course on the west to the basketball courts on the east. The amenities could be enjoyed all the time, residents say, if the park were better lit at night.

"Residents want to take their kids there, but they are afraid," said Adan, who lives across the street from the park and works with the City Heights Community Development Corp., a city agency that is part of the effort. "We want to take over Colina Park."

First up, Adan and her neighbors say, is to create a Neighborhood Watch program. They also want the city to install lighting, and have sought the counsel of Bernie Piceno, the community relations officer for the San Diego Police Department's Mid-City Division.

Piceno has seen the challenge the Colina Park residents face. The greater City Heights community is made up of 79,000 residents, with a median income of \$25,500 -- about half the citywide median income of \$49,500. Colina Park's is even less, at \$18,000.

The area also is strikingly diverse, and has attracted many of the region's most recent emigres from Africa and Asia. Both Piceno and Nguyen said the language barrier has been a problem in building partnerships in Colina Park.

"Right now, the public around that area is not real proactive on organizing monthly meetings," said Piceno, who has worked in the division for 12 years. "They're not really linked in together yet."

Michael knows how important those bonds are, and cited the successes of residents in La Jolla and the College Area at City Hall. He and the others want the city to pay them heed as well.

Their newfound activism led them to take note of who was represented at the Aug. 5 park rally. April Boling and Marti Emerald, the remaining candidates to take over Councilman Jim Madaffer's District 7 seat, both attended. Mayor Jerry Sanders, who they say they invited, did not show.

Adan, Michael and Nguyen joined with four other neighborhood activists at a youth computer center last week, three days before a meeting to reflect on the rally and ponder what comes next.

Though they share goals of improving safety and increasing youth activities, there is still debate about what path to take to achieve them.

"We've heard people living in other areas say people in City Heights are not good people," said Nguyen, a county employee who also runs an immigration service. "Yes, we're poor, we don't make a lot of income, but we care and we want the government to pay attention to us."

Martin Opondo prefers self-sufficiency.

"We should not depend on the government so much," said Opondo, who is seeking work as a guard. "It's us who are the first line of defense, so we should learn to do our own thing."

Michael is happy that the residents have shown enough dedication to have such a conversation.

"Once you get everybody working together, you can keep the trouble out," Michael said. "Once everybody's committed, that's when the strength comes in."

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1,2,3. Crissy Pascual / Union-Tribune photos

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