City Heights celebrates its diversity
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Author: ERIC YOUNG

On most days, Central and Polk avenues form an unremarkable intersection in the middle of City Heights.

But yesterday afternoon, a diverse collection of people transformed the thoroughfare into a colorful urban fairground to celebrate the mix of residents in the crowded urban neighborhood.

The second annual City Heights Multicultural Fair played out under an unrelenting sun, featured a musical score by local musicians and was fueled by ethnic cuisine.

The one-day fair gave City Heights residents "something to sing about," said Leah Goodwin, who helped organize the event. "All you hear about City Heights is maybe it's not a good place to live, but these people live here and they are proud of it. A lot of people want to share -- and that's what will make the whole world work, not just City Heights."

In a neighborhood that has to deal with crime, crowding and tough business conditions, yesterday was a celebration of the community's most essential element: it's people, who number more than 60,000.

For City Heights residents like Heuh Heu, the day signified how far the neighborhood has come in recognizing what different cultures have to contribute to the area. When Heu was growing up and attending City Heights' Central Elementary School, "There was no such thing like this going on for people to understand each other" and for people to see that "everyone is unique in their own way."

Organizers were glad the fair happened at all. Last year, they were washed out by a sudden rain. From that washout emerged yesterday's larger event with booths offering foods from bratwurst to carne asada tacos, and goods from clothes to goldfish. Dragon dancers, rappers and guitarists took turns on a small stage.

For some small businesses like Rob Howard's, it offered a chance for recognition. Under a small canopy, Howard was selling books and toys aimed at minority adults and children, especially blacks.

"Things like this are great," Howard said, gesturing toward the crowd. "You get out here and learn about other people."

A few yards away, Ivan Garcia was sweating under a black sombrero as he danced on the fair's stage. Garcia, 17, and several other young dancers were stomping out Jalisco,
Sinaloa and Napoleon numbers in front of audience members who fanned themselves with hands or hats.

"This is a good way to show our roots," Garcia said after he left the stage, his white shirt sticking to his chest.

"We're really glad to be here showing our culture," said Garcia, lead choreographer of Ballet Folklorico Ixcuintla, an Aztec word referring to a small, hairless dog.

A short while later, Lakisha Mays rocked her hips to the lyrical patter of two 13-year-old rappers in a group called Unique Rap Style. Mays came with family members from San Marcos to attend the fair.

"I like it, I think it's pretty good," she said of the day's entertainment. "We came down to see a lot of people doing different things and singing and stuff."

Caption: 1 PIC
Startling event: Youngsters react to dragon dancers from Nhu Li Temple, performing at the Multicultural Fair. Union-Tribune / JIM BAIRD
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