Azalea Park's outreach to gays is winning believers
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"It all turned out so well, we're just pinching ourselves." VICKI DAVIS A lesbian who lives in Azalea Park

John Northrop was intrigued by the unusual outreach effort from the Azalea Park neighborhood, but he was skeptical.

He heard last year how residents began trying to attract gays and lesbians to the area in the hopes they would rent or buy homes and refurbish them, improving conditions in a middle-class, racially mixed community that was not aging gracefully.

"I kind of sat back and watched and waited to see if they could do what they wanted to do," Northrop, 30, recalled.

Two months ago he became a believer. Northrop bought a two-bedroom, one-bath home in Azalea Park, a canyon-laced area on the southern tip of City Heights.

Now Northrop echoes the comments of several other homosexual men and women who bought Azalea Park homes during the past year, saying he found a quiet, cohesive neighborhood that is on the upswing.

For some years, Azalea Park, like many other San Diego inner-city neighborhoods, had shown symptoms of urban decline: homes that were dilapidated and abandoned, absentee landlords who were slow to make repairs, graffiti.

But the half-square-mile community had plenty of solidly built, post-World War II homes in the $100,000 range. Some residents thought the time had come to get people into those homes and sought homosexuals because of their involvement in the community and their tendency to take care of their properties.

To spread the word among the gay community, a small group of neighbors, some of them heterosexual, hoisted a banner at last year's gay and lesbian pride parade: "Azalea Park. Affordable Canyon Neighborhood."

The response was immediate. Several gays and lesbians toured the area and expressed interest in buying.

"I was in shock," said Vicki Davis, a lesbian who helped carry the banner and who already was living in Azalea Park. "It all turned out so well, we're just pinching ourselves. I think it will snowball in the future."

Soon people such as Tracy Tompkins were moving in. Tompkins, a lesbian, had her fill of apartment living. She liked what she saw in the Azalea Park area and began renting a four-bedroom, two-car-garage home in November.
"Living in a house and going to community meetings, you meet everyone and that's what it's all about," she said.

Several residents said this week they thought the influx of gays and lesbians has been largely uneventful.

"I don't know anybody that has a problem with it," said Michelle Muntean, who is straight.

"It seems like a lot of the gay people who have moved in have been active in the community. I hope we get more people who are active in the community," she said.

Some heterosexual neighbors who attend neighborhood meetings have said they sometimes tire of hearing about gay issues, said David Turner, who is gay.

"It's like, 'OK, we're all people, what is this gay thing?' -- which I kind of agree with," Turner said.

But that has not necessarily soured relations, the construction worker said. He and his companion "get along fine with the people who live around us and all the straight folks" in general, he said.

While some gays and lesbians have brought money and community spirit to the neighborhood, residents say factors such as an active neighborhood association, a long-running cleanup committee and good relations with the police also have boosted the neighborhood.

As many as 60 residents attend the monthly meetings of the Azalea Park Neighborhood Association.

The neighborhood, along with City Heights in general, receives regular graffiti paint-out sessions from members of Project Clean, formed by homeowners. The group, led by Linda Pennington, also picks up trash along the area's main thoroughfares and in canyons.

Patrol officers talk regularly with several homeowners and rely on them for continual updates about problem areas or crimes.

Residents and Anne Christensen, a real-estate agent who works in the Azalea Park area, predicted that interest in the neighborhood will continue among homosexuals. To help ensure that, the neighborhood entered a float -- dubbed Homo Improvement -- in this year’s gay and lesbian pride parade. Residents also prepared a booth showing a five-minute video featuring residents describing the neighborhood and their homes.