

City Heights does its best to show it's best

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With the newly poured concrete and just-mortared brick as backdrops, thousands of City Heights neighbors and friends had plenty to be pleased with yesterday at their ninth annual International Village Celebration.

"There's the new Weingart Library, two new schools and a computer center opening up in three months -- and the new Retail Village," an 111,000-square-foot shopping center, said Jay Powell, executive director of the City Heights Community Development Corp.

"And a new Albertson's, Kragen Auto Parts, Washington Mutual and Starbucks. And we know they're going to be employing local people, perhaps as many as 450 new jobs."

The daylong street festival began with a groundbreaking ceremony for still another phase of Urban Village, the \$100 million public and private redevelopment project begun in 1994 that is one of the city's largest.

The newest phase includes an Office Center, which will house primarily nonprofit and government agencies in a six-story building, and the Urban Village Townhomes -- with 116 residential units, most of them three-bedroom town houses -- for a total of 510,000 square feet.

Price Charities is financing the \$43 million project, with help from the city's Redevelopment Agency. It will include stores and a large Head Start child-care center.

Arguably San Diego's most diverse area, City Heights is home to about 80,000 people who speak more than 30 languages. They are spread across 3,000 acres, knitted together in about 12 neighborhoods such as Castle and Fairmount Village.

That was apparent yesterday in the celebration's multi-racial, multi-cultural crowd, and the colorful and diverse vendor booths.

Ethiopian jewelry was on display next to Hawaiian T-shirts; the smell from exotic soaps and incense competed with those from the booths of Mary Kay Cosmetics.

In an alley, a colorful art and photo exhibit created by City Heights Art Lanes for Kids -- also known as CHALK -- was on display. And a few feet away was Vue Yang, 18, busily creating colorful painted art on the faces and arms of children.

"I like the fact that we have good schools and good police, and that there are no bad people in our neighborhood," said Silvia Ramirez, a 15-year City Heights resident.

"There are more and more people coming into this area," said Greg Winston, an instructor at Patrick Henry High School. "There are more mom-and-pop stores, and a very big effort being made by the city and the state and federal governments to build up this area. I feel City Heights is on its way up."

Hamid Amin, a senior at Hoover High School, came from Egypt four years ago and wants to be an engineer. For the time being, though, he wants to get a job "to make some money so I can be independent." He visited the McDonald's booth at the festival's job fair, where many of the businesses moving into City Heights were recruiting employees.

Officers Steve Rosenbloom and Carl Pira, both six-year veterans of the City Heights beat for the San Diego Police Department, which sponsored the job fair, said they've seen an "immense positive change" in that time.

"It deserved a bad reputation because it had a lot of crime," Rosenbloom said of the old neighborhood. Now, he said, rates of major crimes -- burglaries, robberies and narcotics -- are all down.

He and Pira credited the change to a new police attitude that focuses on solving problems rather than just investigating crimes and arresting criminals. They say that has occurred only because the people in the community have helped.

James and Lisa Woodard, who strolled past the booths with their three children, agreed. "This area is definitely changing for the better," Lisa Woodard said. "They're building that beautiful mall, and we're getting a lot of stuff we've never had."

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