

A City Heights venture Community takes on its problems, makes old store into center

San Diego Union-Tribune - Friday, June 1, 2001

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Several City Heights neighbors have come together to transform a former lapidary shop into the crown jewel of their fight against crime and neglect.

The Teralta West Neighborhood Alliance Community Center, 4286 Marlborough Ave., opens for business at an 11 a.m. dedication tomorrow. After that, the group's president, Maria Cortez, and its secretary, Tania Velazquez, will work there five days a week.

They will help monitor community disputes, such as landlord-tenant disagreements, and connect people to available local services, including education programs. The center will house Kids in Control, a group of 13- to 17-year-olds who patrol the area on their bicycles searching for graffiti and watching out for other teens as they walk home from school.

"This is a really good chance for the neighborhood to get in the business of taking back their neighborhood," said Al Stasukevich of the City Heights Town Council.

David Tos, community relations officer with the San Diego Police Department, said that although there are similar centers in other parts of the country, he believes this one is among the first in which a community has become its own neighborhood problem-solver, without police or other intervention.

"They are the ones funding and facilitating themselves," Tos said. "These are soccer moms. Others are run by agencies."

Thelma De Vorss, who was born in the house behind the old gem shop 77 years ago, will collect the rent -- \$1 per year for 10 years. Her brother, George De Vorss, owned the lapidary business.

The property belongs to her now. The success of the venture belongs to a lot of people.

The sense of ownership was evident at a recent work party. Tos and Richard Gorondy, a former drug dealer, carried in a large wooden table. It will be used for group meetings.

Neighbor David Springs eagerly showed off the place. He said he was too old, at 82, for physical labor but that he donated cash to the cause.

"You should have seen all the Christmas in April people working," Springs said. "It looked like an army. They transformed the place. It had been piled to the gunnels with junk."

Photos taken before the renovation prove it. The shop's three rooms held mountains of trash that took volunteers weeks to haul away.

Christmas in April, a local affiliate of a national group that refurbishes homes for people in need, organized the volunteers. De Vorss' building wasn't a good candidate for the program, as the organization doesn't help people who have income property, said executive director Sigourney Richmond-Darbey.

So the City Heights Town Council stepped in and persuaded De Vorss to give the 900-square-foot building to a community group for a long-term lease, Richmond-Darbey said, allowing the renovation to go forward.

"Nobody ever approached me before," De Vorss said. "I was not about to sell the property and I didn't want the hassle of a tenant."

De Vorss, whose family moved there in 1922, used the building for storage. When her brother and two sisters moved away, she stayed on.

Cortez, with support from more than 30 neighbors, applied for and received a \$5,000 grant from The San Diego Foundation, a nonprofit organization that manages a variety of philanthropic funds and programs.

Cortez said the center is a way for residents to take charge of their neighborhood.

"Instead of running to the police and burdening the police with our little problems, we felt as a community, we should get it together," she said.

The deal is sitting well with a lot of people who have seen the building with broken, boarded-up windows transformed into a peaceful oasis.

Neighbor Jimmie Sue Springs calls De Vorss "the queen" for her part in the deal, but De Vorss is having none of it.

"No, no. I'm the landlady," De Vorss deadpanned. "I don't know how I'm going to be able to spend all that (rent) money."

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