

For 20 years she's been behind the scenes -- cleaning up

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Activist Linda Pennington began organizing neighborhood cleanups a decade before philanthropist Sol Price brought his ambitious vision for erasing urban blight to City Heights.

When she and her husband Mark arrived in the blue-collar neighborhood in 1981, she had no idea how much effort she would invest in improving the area.

"I was looking for cheap rent," she recalled. "I was naive. I thought the neighborhood just needed cleaning."

She soon realized that overgrown canyons near her home were posing a fire threat. "There was a lot of dead brush that had to be dealt with. I started organizing cleanups."

Without funding, Pennington and the volunteers she organized invested their time and energy. Eventually they added graffiti removal and tree planting to their agenda.

After several years, "I realized I had become a full-time volunteer. I started calling my group Project CLEAN: Clean Livable Enjoyable Attractive Neighborhoods. I find myself all over City Heights cleaning up alleys, cleaning up graffiti."

In addition to leading anti-litter drives, she became active in the Azalea Park Neighborhood Association in south City Heights. In the early 1990s she heard that Price and former City Councilman William Jones were considering City Heights as a laboratory for testing their theories on redevelopment. Their plan was to fight inner-city decay on multiple fronts by improving housing, schools, recreational facilities and business opportunities.

Because the community badly needed the funds a philanthropist like Price could bring, Pennington encouraged him to get involved. She was part of a small group that met with Price in 1994.

"I remember sitting down with him and 12 others and we pitched our neighborhood to him," she said.

Price wanted to know how much community support he could expect. "He said he knew we had worked hard but would we work even harder? We said we would. And we have. He realized that we were going to have to pull in a lot more people. We told him we knew that."

The projects Price, Jones and others have brought to City Heights have changed the community "beyond my wildest dreams really," she said.

Pennington, 52, says she has no desire to live anywhere else. "City Heights is on a plateau above the city," she said. "You always have an ocean breeze here. I love my yard. I am planning to live here until I die."

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