

Some finding marriage, family and sex (Noregna Park) and say "It's in the best place in the world!"



Agents of change

Reinvent the Chicago Lawn neighborhood? Si, se puede! Yes, we can!

By Patrick T. Reardon
Tribune staff reporter
Published September 22, 2005

Arrayed on this page are some of the faces of the new Chicago Lawn -- a Southwest Side neighborhood east of Midway Airport, once known as the all-white community where Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was hit in the head by a rock and where the American Nazi Party had its headquarters.

For 40 years, Chicago Lawn and the area around it has been a neighborhood in transition, and that has been good news.

Stellar work by two groups -- the Greater Southwest Development Corp. and Southwest Organizing Project -- has kept the community economically stable even as longtime white residents moved away or died off. Today, Chicago Lawn is a kaleidoscope of races,

faiths, ethnicities and languages, much richer in diversity but far less cohesive than when everyone shared the same background. That's the impetus behind the latest organizing effort.

Last November, more than 700 people crowded into the Eberhart Elementary School assembly hall to map out an ambitious program to cut down crime, improve the schools and beef up job opportunities. But the key element, says James Capraro, the executive director of Greater Southwest, is nurturing the connections between residents -- "to re-invent Chicago Lawn, one relationship at a time."

A tall order, but when Capraro asked the assembly hall crowd if they could bring it about, the hundreds stood and shouted, over and over, "Si, se puede! Yes, we can!"

Since then, the community has scored a particularly sweet victory against predatory lenders, winning approval from the Illinois General Assembly for a pilot program of counseling for many neighborhood home buyers.

In mid-August, some 200 community people got to know each other while dining on a smorgasbord of ethnic foods at a fundraiser. Many had been among the crowd in November, shouting, "Yes, we can!" But even more were new to the neighborhood-building effort.

Next Tuesday, that effort is likely to gain new momentum when, at the invitation of Mayor Daley, Capraro and two of the community activists on this page -- Edith Robles and Earl Johnson -- travel to City Hall.

There, they'll lay out the neighborhood's plans for improvement and how the city can help. And, if the mayor likes what he hears, he'll be able to keep red tape to a minimum and ensure that his aides give the community an open ear.

The new Chicago Lawn is still evolving -- but, in a real way, it's already here.

Loisteen Walker

Walker, 52, a Chicago Lawn resident for 15 years, is the president of the 70th-California-Fairfield Block Club and lives across the street from Marquette Park:

"Some Sunday mornings, I wake up and see the park, and say, 'I'm in the best place in the world.' In the park on Saturdays and Sundays, we've got soccer, basketball, tennis, golf -- and it's all different ethnicities. Some of it is [ethnically and racially] mixed. Some of it is separate. But even those that are separate, there's no tension.

"Every day, I think about [the 1966 attack on Martin Luther King Jr. in the park] because, every morning, I walk the park with three other ladies. But it's a different day. We walk at 5 o'clock, and I see Hispanic ladies. I see white ladies.

"It's exciting [to try to create a new community], and it's scary. My husband and I want to stay here if everything's going to blossom."

Jeri Shiners

Shiners, 70, a neighborhood resident for 47 years, is working to halt lending practices that result in foreclosures and abandoned buildings:

"The meeting at Eberhart School was so energetic. People were very enthusiastic. But anything like this is an uphill battle. It's not all go-go-go, and there are setbacks. In our meetings, I always bring up the negative side, and they talk me around. You can't do anything except keep plugging. You can't give up.

"I'm optimistic about the future. There's a lot of work to do. We need to recruit more people to stand up and be counted. I think we'll be able to do that. I think it'll continue to be a good place to live."

Edith Robles

Robles, 33, a neighborhood resident for seven years, teaches religion Sunday mornings at St. Nicholas Catholic Church:

"Our block was full of white people. We were the second Hispanic family on the block. We were not welcomed by our neighbors. It was terrible. When I saw all the Anglos start leaving, it was painful. I couldn't understand why they wouldn't give themselves a chance to get to know us.

"The way we've started [to create a new community] is talking with each other and building bridges between cultures, between customs, between languages. To me, all this diversity is a strength. I know there are a lot of people who don't see it this way. We came here so our kids can grow up with Mexicans and maybe Polish people and African-Americans, and see them as equals.

"The feeling I had onstage [at the Eberhart School meeting] was wonderful. My heart was pounding so hard to see all the white people, black people and Hispanic people together. And, to be reminded of that, I want to cry. My skin goes bumpy. It was so beautiful."

Jose Ortiz

Ortiz, 27, a resident of the neighborhood for eight years, coaches a teenage soccer team and has worked to reduce crime in the area:

"It was quiet when we moved in. We didn't see much violence. Then we started to see gang members on corners, trying to make the streets their own. Every time someone would drive by, they'd give them that look. They didn't say anything, but they were scaring people.

"We had meetings with the police commanders [in the 8th and 9th Districts] and the

alderman. We were trying to get a commitment from them to work with us so we can have a safe neighborhood. We asked for more patrols around the schools, and they did it. The gang members, they tried to pull students to join gangs. But, every time they saw the cop car, they knew there was nothing they could do.

"If we just let it go the way it was going, most of the people would move from the area, and it was going to become a dangerous area. The street -- it's our street, not the gang members' street. Nobody can take that away from us if we stay together."

Rami Nashashibi

Nashashibi, 32, a resident of the neighborhood for much of the last 10 years, is the executive director of the Chicago Lawn-based Inner-city Muslim Action Network, which provides social services, including a health clinic, for Muslims and non-Muslims:

"We had no incidents here in terms of any backlash after Sept. 11. In fact, the opposite happened. We had nuns and priests and even segments of the Jewish community say they understood the atrocious events in New York and Washington didn't reflect the Muslim community or the faith of Islam.

"I want to live in an area where it's a diverse group of people, where I can walk my street and see a lot of different people from different walks of life.

"We're the only Arab family on our block. Next door to us is a Nigerian Muslim family. Most of the people are African-American. There are three or four Latino families and a couple older Lithuanian families.

"I'm not strange here. I may still stand out. But, here, there's a greater degree of tolerance."

Earl Johnson

Johnson, 35, a neighborhood resident for 11 years, stood up to drug dealers, even after his garage was torched, and he badgered police until they focused crime-fighting efforts on his block:

"After we got the drug dealers off the block, NHS [Neighborhood Housing Services of Chicago] came out with 100 volunteers, and we just beautified the block.

"We painted people's porches and windowsills. The city brought in new sidewalks. The whole block got sod from one corner to the next corner.

"People are coming and sitting on their porches now. They used to be hostages in their homes. Kids are coming out to play.

"This is a nice place to move to. The bungalows over here are just fabulous."

preardon@tribune.com