

NEW AMERICANS and the immigrant experience

A transformation happened in City Heights from being a community with a suburban feel to a haven for refugees that started when Vietnamese immigrants first began settling here in the 1970's. These refugees streamed into City Heights starting in 1974, a year after the last American troops left and a year before Saigon fell. Cambodians and Laotians followed them. Refugees from Central America were also relocated in the neighborhood fleeing brutal civil wars in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala.

Ethnic Albanians from Kosovo and Kurds from Iraq were resettled here briefly in the 1990's. In 1998, East Africans fled border wars in Ethiopia and Eritrea and were resettled in the community.

The Sudanese and Somalis, who were also fleeing brutal conflicts in their countries, followed these refugees. Commented a local resident; "Anytime there is a conflict in the world, refugees from the country land in City Heights within three months." The San Diego region is designated

by the State Department and by other certified Refugee Relocation Organizations as a resettlement or "immigration zone" for refugees, one of six in the country.

According to census demographers, a quarter of all immigrants who entered the United States in the 1990's are settled in California. While this seems a high percentage, it's a significant drop from the 1980's when 37 percent of all new immigrants called California 'home'. According to the 2000 census, 44 percent of City Height's population is foreign born. The residents have emigrated from more than 60 countries and speak more than 30 languages and dialects. The great numbers of them come from Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Ethiopia, Vietnam, Mexico, South America, Guatemala and Honduras.

The growth of San Diego County's foreign born is a tale of two distinct groups, legal and illegal immigrants. Both have put down roots in the County in great numbers since the 1970's and each group has fared differently because of its status.

More than 75% of the nation's 31 million immigrants and refugees are here legally. To enter the United States, they must have a sponsor or are relocated through certified organizations such as the International Rescue Committee (IRC) or the Catholic Charities. New immigrants often arrive with nothing more than the shirts on their backs. Although many are educated and professionals, they often arrive with no contacts, no ability to speak the language and no idea how to navigate the complex society we live in.

Refugees often hope that when they arrive, they will get a nice house, money and have no problems. Their idea of America is based on what they have seen in the media. The reality is quite different. Even though they are given basic financial assistance for housing, healthcare, clothing and food, it is not enough - particularly in the San Diego's expensive housing market. Refugees struggle to meet basic daily needs. They must learn to speak a new language, seek employment and adjust to living in a new culture while attempting to maintain their own cultural identity. More than half of the refugees are women with children whose husbands have been killed or were unable to qualify for relocation.

"Arriving in the United States as a refugee is like being born as a new baby. You have to learn to sit-up, crawl, walk and talk. You are starting all over again. If you are an adult with responsibilities like taking care of your family, you have enormous pressures to survive and take care of them at the same time. Add the cultural tradition of the new country that may be in conflict with your own traditions and it creates tremendous stress for the family."

Elena Cruz, Job Placement Coordinator

Funded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement

The longer immigrants are here, the more likely they are to move out of poverty and be proficient in English. Many New Americans have been here now for more than 20 years and are getting older. They have a strong work ethic, often work long hours and their households have many wage earners. Combined with a strong priority placed on education, most have moved successfully into the middle class.

Another quarter of the nation's 31 million immigrants are undocumented and more than half of them cross the border to work from Mexico. Their lack of legal status has created an "underground" population of workers and families that are struggling to survive. Most are limited to low-paying jobs, unable to purchase homes or to participate as citizens.

City Heights is home to many of these immigrants and this provides rich diversity and unique challenges for the community. Today, walking through City Heights is a quick trip around the globe. You can eat in restaurants from dozens of countries, visit churches from all faiths and even play chess with Cambodian entrepreneurs or visit a Chinese herbalist. Cultures that wouldn't normally know each other or even clash in their own countries now dine in the same restaurants and shop in the same markets. There are Somalis who had never seen a Vietnamese and Laotians who had never seen a Russian. It is not unusual for immigrants to open businesses and as they prosper, leave for other neighborhoods. These successful entrepreneurs are always replaced by new waves of refugees ensuring that the community remains the most diverse in the San Diego region and in the country.

City Heights today is a dynamic "hub" of diverse populations that is constantly changing. Immigrants from countries all over the world are being relocated into this "immigration zone" - Most are staying and starting new lives in a new land. Some will leave the community as they prosper and relocate to other communities in the region or even in other parts of the country. Few ever return to their countries.

NATIVE BORN AMERICANS - the original residents of CityHeights

There is another face to City Heights made up of the residents who are native born and has either come from generations of families who helped to establish City Heights, once its own city, in the 1920's, or who moved to City Heights. These residents, most who came primarily after the World War II or more recently have moved into the community because housing was more affordable than most other places in the region.

In the 1920's, City Heights was once a popular community for families, entrepreneurs and investors. Blue-collar neighborhoods once thrived with a library, parks, good schools and a strong business corridor along University and El Cajon Avenues, considered the eastern gateway to the

City of San Diego. The community boasted panoramic views, tree-lined streets - "a place where you want to spend the rest of your days."

A dramatic change however took place after World War II. Soldiers returned and families celebrated. New businesses were started in the community and residents were ready to begin again. However, the late 1950's saw an explosion of large shopping centers in newly forming suburban areas such as Mission Valley and Fashion Valley. City Heights suffered - the high volume of customers no longer shopped along University and El Cajon Avenues. Businesses closed or struggled to survive.

San Diego city officials reasoned that by building multi-family apartment complexes (called six-packs) in the neighborhoods, they could generate more customers by bringing more residents to the neighborhoods. With apartment buildings built next to single-family homes, residential streets became densely populated, neighbors became strangers, crime increased and neighborhoods no longer felt safe. Residents who could afford it fled to other communities leaving behind a significantly older and poorer population. Mostly African Americans moved into the vacant apartments and homes followed by Latinos and Asians. In 1970, the median age in City Heights was 70 years old!

Today, City Heights is still defined within the same 100 blocks but the change in its demographics has been dramatic. In 1970, there were 17,100 dwelling units of which 31 percent were multiple family units. This number rose to 55 percent - 24,385 housing units that would house more than one family in 1990. Its population for the same 100 blocks would swell from 40,100 in 1970 to 67,548 residents by 1990. Today, City Heights totals 32,000 housing units with 60% of those being multi-family units and a population of more than 78,000 residents.

Its cultural and racial demographics would also change dramatically. In 1970, Whites made up 76% of the population, Hispanic 15% and Blacks 7%. By 1990, Whites made up 45% of the population, Hispanics 45% and Blacks 11%. Today, Whites make up less than 40% of the population. Like California and the future of most communities in America over the next 20 years, City Heights has no racial majority.

Such growth and change has consequences that continue to be felt today. Economic development has given way to under-invested businesses and neighborhoods. Less costly and deteriorating rental units have replaced home ownership. In one decade, the median household income increased only slightly from \$20,367 in 1980 to \$20,580 in 1990 and \$25,933 today. During this time, there was also a large increase in the number of households reporting incomes of \$15,000 a year or less. In 1980, there were 6,223 such households; by 1990, that number increased to 9,608.

Today, unemployment, poverty and crime rates continue to be high in City Heights. County statistics report a poverty rate of 19.22% (200% above the countywide average). Only 40% of the adult residents have graduated from high school and nearly 60% earn less than \$25,000 a year; more than 30% live below the poverty line. Immigrant families qualifying as refugees receive some federal assistance but it small compared to what is needed to live in San Diego's housing market. In many of the homes and apartments today, more than one family lives together with adults and many children. Landlords of apartments are often absent and do not monitor who is living on their properties or what activities are taking place.

Leanne Brown, 37, a resident of City Heights who had grown up in the community and remembers a time when she once knew all her neighbors, described the gradual deterioration of the community. She shares what she saw in an article from the San Diego Union Tribune on August 19, 1990

"As everyone started getting older and their kids grew up, they started selling or renting the houses out. The apartments started going up and more people moved into the area. Traffic started getting worse. The schools became overcrowded. With prices going up on houses, both parents had to go to work. The kids became latchkey kids and they started hanging around together to substitute for family. Then came the gangs, and we started having graffiti. The gangs had to prove themselves, so they started doing burglaries and vandalism. It was a gradual thing. But it has escalated in the last 10 years to the point where we have at least three to four very active gangs in the area."

Other residents have made their own observations- *"Drug dealers and the mafia were attracted to teh community- it was an easy place to make drug deals in vacant houses along highway corridors 805 and 15 that had long been abandoned by the City of San Diego. Illegal businesses such as prostitution prospered along El Cajon Boulevard"*.

Even though many new changes have taken place; the completion of the Highway 15 corridor by the City of San Diego, the construction of retail, business and public spaces through the financed by Sol Price and the development of new low-income housing, City Heights continues to be seen as one of the most blighted in the San Diego region - a place that began so many years ago as a beacon of hope and prosperity to a community that remains overwhelmed by its diminishing resources and growing needs.

Portions from this overview of City Heights were taken from Price Charities Group's "A Short History of City Heights" http://www.pricecharities.com/CHI_history.shtml