



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Taking a break in front of a mural, a community service project.

A delicate truce now reigns

Gangs

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SANTA CRUZ — Where violence between rival youth gangs once flared, a delicate truce now reigns.

The truce is supported by parents and members of the community who have come together to give their youths new hope.

The picture is much different than it was three years ago when a rift between the Chicanos (those of Mexican heritage who were born here) and Latinos (those of Mexican and other latin bloods who recently immigrated to the United States) developed into a full-scale rivalry over territorial rights.

The Chicanos, the "home boys" of the westside area, and the Latinos, the immigrants who were settling in the eastside or Beach Flats area, divided into two distinct gangs — the westsiders and the eastsiders.

Then, violence between the two groups — especially in the Beach Flats area — was not unusual.

The Beach Flats neighborhood borders on the southern end of Beach Street across from the Boardwalk.

Some say the quiet is a brooding one.

The peace is tentative, they say. People are treading softly. It is too soon to know if the violence is gone.

Others say that it has been at least 18 months since violence last rocked the neighborhood. They say the neighborhood is changing.

Several individuals in the area — among them a youth counselor, a mother, a police officer, and a soup kitchen owner — have contributed to helping the youth fill in the gap of nothing to do, with healthy activities.

Leibrandt Street is the heart of the eastside barrio.

Here, children are playing. People are going about their business.

The signs of economic hardship prevail. Windows broken in times past, remain unmended. Houses with peeling paint stand together.

It is quiet.

Near Beach Street, a group of youths are gathered. A scaffold is suspended above them.

On the scaffold Ruben Molina is working.

He is painting a mural on the side of a small building that is to become the free drop-in medical clinic for women only.

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Positive things are happening here.

Organization and communication are taking the place of disruption and distrust.

The mural project began as a community service project proposal to the campus activities department of UCSC.

Dan Alejandre, a youth counselor dedicated to helping the youth in both the eastside and westside areas, obtained the grant to do several murals — some on the westside and some on the eastside. The women's clinic site was one of those chosen.

The mural depicts the only female Aztec god Coatlicue pronounced wa teak' clay) the mother of all the Aztec gods. The original is a colossal statue in the Museo

Nacional de Antropologia in Mexico City. Molina has been working on the mural for almost two months and plans to finish in another week.

The youths in the area have taken a community interest in the project. They run errands for the artist and have painted some of the larger Aztec motifs on the mural.

Other activities have sprung up to combat the potential violence brewing in the economically-deprived area.

Alejandre describes a boxing team that is in the organizational stage, but lacks funds to buy equipment.

'Fundraiser' is a new term to the barrio youths, but they are willing to give it a try.

Peter Carota, who manages the Saint

Francis Catholic Kitchen on Beach Street, known in the barrio as 'the soup kitchen' is letting the youths use the restaurant for the fundraiser.

Alejandre said the eastside youths are enthusiastic about the boxing team, since it has always been a popular sport in Mexico. He said the youths are going to make menudo, the Mexican soup, for the fundraiser. The parents in the barrio are also enthusiastic about the project. "They would rather see the boys in the ring than fighting in the street," he said. The group will also be taking field trips to boxing matches and will use the money to purchase insurance and to buy equipment.

Carota, the operator of the kitchen, said it is a gathering place for the eastside youths. "They come to eat and to talk."

Susan Alvarez is a mother who lives on the westside. She comes to the soup kitchen to meet with the eastside kids.

She is the goodwill ambassador. Spurred to action when one of her eleven children became involved in the gang violence which erupted between the two barrios, she organized a group called Mexicano Unidos, or Mexicans United.

She said so far the youths have not mingled much, but she is hopeful for the future. "If we had more people to help out like Peter (Carota)," she said, "I think we could do even more. Because we really need more people, adults, involved in trying to help out, not just parents who have kids in trouble."

She said that about 24 youths are involved in Mexicano Unidos. "We do foresee

a lot more positive things, and for it to grow even more," she added.

She also mentioned the newly-formed soccer team. They have just purchased uniforms with revenue sharing monies received from the city in October. The funds are also funding karate and weight lifting classes at Santa Cruz High School and the Loudon Nelson Community Center. The classes here, she said, were already formed, but the money from her organization is helping them to continue to serve the youth of the area.

Alvarez said the kids were not that excited about educational and sports activities at first — that communication was a problem. But, she said, parents have talked to them, are willing to help with problems, and are studying the foundation for a better relationship all the way around.

As Alejandre and Alvarez move between the two communities and organizing activities to promote goodwill between the barrios, an outsider is also becoming involved.

Sean Upton, juvenile officer for the Santa Cruz Police Department, is getting involved in a positive way.

The youths in the area accept his presence.

Alejandre said Upton does not represent the immediate threat of arrest normally connected with the presence of a police officer. They trust him and feel good about his presence in the neighborhood. The other police officers also respect Upton's activities in the neighborhood, Alejandre added.

Upton said, "We've moved away from a strong gang affiliation in the city. The environment is becoming pro-active rather than re-active."

"What we're trying to get away from is the division between eastside and westside."

The two predominant groups, he said, started in the latter part of 1979, but the old barrier between the neighborhoods has been broken. "The area has definitely seen a calming effect over the past 18 months," he added.

Although economic issues and social problems may always exist in this struggling community, the east and the west may yet meet here in Santa Cruz. Parents and community leaders are at least struggling to forge the path.

The youths in the area have taken a community interest in the project.



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Ruben Molina works on mural, a sign of positive change in eastside barrio

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