

Bob Walters, president of the Azalea Park Neighborhood Association, goes door to door to deliver the community newsletter. *Howard Lipin / Union-Tribune*

PRIDE GOES LONG WAY IN AZALEA PARK

Gays took up invitation to help fix neighborhood

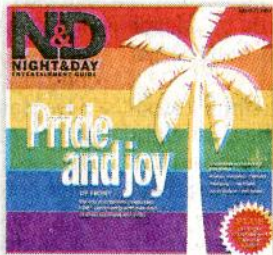
By Matthew T. Hall
STAFF WRITER

The sounds of Azalea Park aren't that unusual at first.

Dogs bark, children laugh, a plastic ball skitters across a driveway. Music, conversation and televised soccer games surf a welcome breeze in English and Spanish.

Then Bob Walters' shoes begin to scuff the pavement as he steps out to pick up stray trash and deliver 115 community newsletters.

Walters is president of the Azalea Park Neighborhood Association. He knew no one when he bought his home in 1985 for \$68,000. Then he threw a "mortgage-burning party" in 2003 and was floored to find out he knew enough neighbors to



Night&Day:
A guide to the weekend parade and festival celebrating San Diego's LGBT community.

invite 80, and that 40 actually attended.

Azalea Park in mid-city San Diego is that kind of place.

A place where people band together to prevent drug deals, spruce up houses and clear brush in surrounding canyons. A place where scores gather for potlucks and, come summer, march in San Diego's Pride parade to show solidarity with the gay community that has become so closely connected to this neighborhood.

AZALEA PARK

CONTINUED FROM A1

Haven in 1980s for drug dealers and prostitutes

It wasn't always this together.

In the 1980s, Azalea Park was known mostly for drug dealers and prostitutes. To combat this, police officers increased their patrols significantly and residents walked the streets in groups at night to confront, shame or pressure the people in purported drug houses and gang hangouts to change or move.

"We were over here when there was gunfire every night," said Bill Hudson, 62, who's been in Azalea Park 23 years and has 145 stops on his delivery route for *The Parkster* newsletter. "I'm telling you the truth. It was like a shooting gallery right down the street here. When it became night, you didn't go outside. When it became night, you stayed in."

Linda Pennington, now known to neighbors as the "Queen of Azalea Park," arrived in 1981 and started a neighborhood project to clean up its alleys and canyons.

In 1987, she organized an effort to clean up graffiti. In 1993, when she was out of town, her husband, Mark, and a dozen others marched in the Pride parade with banners promoting Azalea Park as a nice place with cheap housing prices that would be nicer with stylish neighbors who had an eye for home improvement.

"We know that gays are good neighbors," Mark Pennington said at the time to a reporter for *The Advocate*, a national news magazine for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community.

Residents carried signs in the parade that read, "WE LOVE OUR GAY NEIGHBORS" and "GAYS WELCOMED." They handed out a fact sheet that said, "Expose Yourself to Azalea Park" and noted its proximity to a popular gay country bar. A year later, they jokingly dubbed their parade float "Homo Improvement."

"We didn't want to be Hillcrest," Linda Pennington said last week. "We just wanted to be a spruced-up neighborhood."

Residents collected names of roughly 100 potential gay and lesbian homebuyers, and 15 to 20 were eventually taken on a tour of the neighborhood.

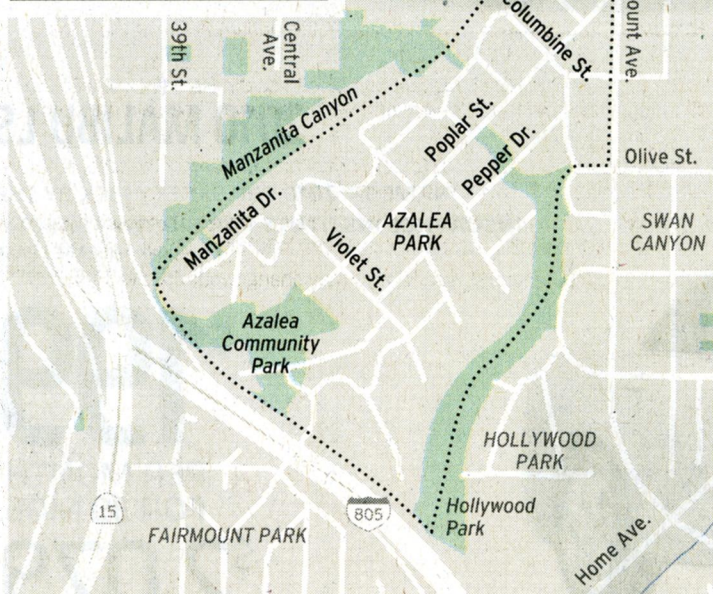
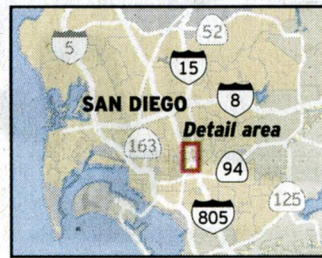
Before long, CNN carried news of the effort to the nation, and by 2003, there were more than 100 gay households in Azalea Park.

"Maybe we attract gay people, and we like attracting gay people," said Tom Lashbrook, who moved into the neighborhood 10 years ago with his partner, Larry May. "But we attract all kinds of people."

There are 800 homes and little else in the densely populated Azalea Park, a community ringed almost entirely by canyons just



Azalea Park's Luis Martinez watches (from left) Martin Rosas, Natalie Martinez, Omar Martinez and Adilene Rosas play catch. Omar and Natalie are Luis' son and daughter. Howard Lipin / Union-Tribune



SOURCE: SanGIS

AARON STECKELBERG / Union-Tribune

east of where Interstates 805 and 15 connect.

It is one of 16 communities in City Heights, a lower-income, ethnically diverse part of San Diego where more than 20 languages are spoken.

Because of its geography, people don't pass through Azalea Park. Vehicles are either heading home or visiting, and most of the visiting is done at houses and the occasional apartment, or at one of two parks.

There are churches but no bars, restaurants or coffee shops in Azalea Park, which is bounded by Manzanita Canyon on the north, Fairmount Avenue on the east, Hollywood Park on the south and I-805 on the west.

"We're practically a gated community," Linda Pennington said.

She edits *The Parkster*, which

Walters, Hudson and others distribute door-to-door each month for the neighborhood association before its regular meetings. On Sunday, as his two children played in the driveway of the house he rents, Luis Martinez said Pennington's work doesn't go unnoticed.

"We read it, and then we recycle it," he said. "It's the only way."

Here, renters and homeowners alike smile, say hello, savor the 34 wooden pieces of carved, flower-themed public art that pepper the area and pass as street signs. They routinely freshen them up with fresh paint.

In this community, the mailman moves in.

Henry Ortiz, a letter carrier who until October had the Azalea Park route for the U.S.

Postal Service for two decades, liked the neighborhood and its "down-to-earth people" so much, he bought a house on Manzanita Drive in 1999.

In recent years, Lashbrook and May's house has become the place where neighbors build their float for the Pride parade, which routinely wins awards from the event's organizers for originality and last year won a crowd favorite award, too.

At one time, the motto on the neighborhood float was "the fastest-growing gay community on the planet." Later, that became "the fastest-growing, gay-friendly neighborhood on the planet."

But after 17 consecutive years of marching along University Street, members of the neighborhood association formally agreed in spring to skip Saturday's parade. That decision is a reflection of the economy, the neighbors' busy schedules and to some degree, the success they've had making over their neighborhood. They said they'll be back next year, though.

Lashbrook and May moved from San Francisco, where they had planted 30 trees in their neighborhood, got used to sweeping sidewalks and seen what a difference they could make.

Lashbrook said they looked for something similar here, and found it in Azalea Park. He said the mind-set many residents of the neighborhood share is more important than ever.

"We kind of feel like we're taking care of ourselves in a hard time," Lashbrook said.

But Walters, known as "Cactus Bob" for all the succulents he's planted in his yard, said it's not all work in Azalea Park.

"If you've had any contact with our neighborhood on a regular basis," he said, "you'll find yourself being invited to a party."

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