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FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, 2000

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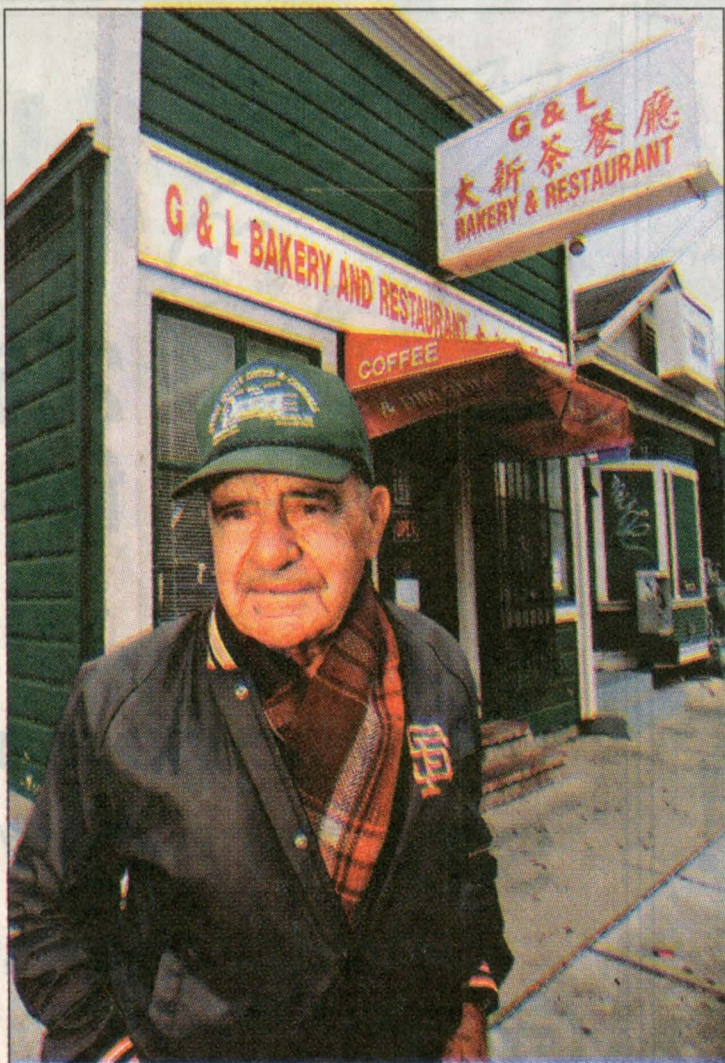
A mural painted on the side of Visitacion Library, on Leland Avenue, reflects the diversity of Visitacion Valley. The neighborhood is seeing new development, soaring real estate prices and a reduction in robberies and muggings.

Photos by JOHN O'HARA / Chronicle

# Neighborhood Shifts

Crime is down, pride is up in transformed Visitacion Valley

By Maitland Zane  
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER



Joe Luccini was born in Visitacion Valley in 1913. In 1928 he earned his first dollar at Dorharty's Grocery, now site of the G&L Bakery. Luccini's sister lives across the street in a house 100 years old.

It's too soon to call it a renaissance. But a brighter future seems to be dawning in Visitacion Valley, long known as one of the most forlorn and crime-ridden corners of town.

"We've been discovered," says Vincent S. Chao, principal of Visitacion Valley Elementary School. He says the influx of Asians in the past decade has transformed the neighborhood, which tomorrow hosts Neighborhood Day 2001, featuring music, food and free immunizations and physical exams for children.

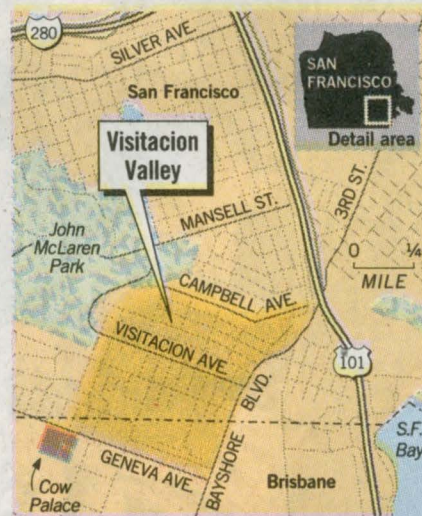
Vis Valley, as locals call it, is a sunny, blue-collar neighborhood tucked down by the San Mateo county line, a hoot and a holler from the Cow Palace.

"When I first took over as principal 12 years ago, much of my time was taken up dealing with vandalism," says Chao, 50, an energetic, community-oriented educator. "Every Monday morning, it seemed, I would come to work to find dozens of windows broken and computers smashed."

He says many of his students lived in Geneva Towers, a housing project erected in 1967 that had fallen into serious disrepair before its demolition two years ago.

"Making home calls in those buildings was scary," says Chao, a Brown University graduate. "The hallways were pitch dark. The elevators didn't work. I was afraid every time I had to go inside."

Since the Towers came down, he says, "there have been a lot of positive changes. We haven't had a break-in here



Chronicle Graphic

in months, and graffiti is minimal. Less crime, more social service agencies, more home ownership, more jobs in a hot market."

Furthermore, Chao says, Vis Valley is well on the way to becoming San Francisco's "fourth Chinatown."

"First, there was the original Chinatown going back to the Gold Rush, then Clement Street in the Richmond, then Judah-Irving in the Sunset, now Vis Valley," he says. "As Chinese, Pacific Islanders and Latinos have moved in, the African American and Caucasian populations have

Visitacion

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# Cash for New Housing Transforms V

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declined."

Located at 55 Schwerin St., about a mile west of Bayshore Boulevard, Visitacion Valley Elementary School has about 470 students. Forty-five percent are Chinese, Chao says, up about 7 percent since 1994. African American youngsters now total 22 percent; Filipinos, 15; Latinos, 11, and Samoans, 5 percent.

Caucasians are the smallest minority at under 2 percent, and Chao says his school now enrolls only "five or six" white youngsters.

Demographically, Vis Valley has become a melting pot of immigrants. Chao says 63 percent of the kids in his school have "limited English proficiency." They grew up speaking Cantonese, Spanish or Tagalog at home, among other languages.

"Most new Vis Valley residents are Latinos and Asians," he says, "the reason being that compared to other neighborhoods, rents are still affordable. The gentrification of the Mission and Noe Valley has put housing out of reach for them."

Not everyone agrees, however, that the city's blazing housing market has missed Vis Valley.

"Prices have escalated rapidly this year," says property developer Michael Strausz. "Until recently, housing in Vis Valley was affordable compared to other parts of town. Now homes are selling for close to \$400,000."

Regardless, in keeping with its multicultural student body, Vis Valley Elementary sponsors Hawaiian, Samoan, Filipino and Hispanic dance classes.

And there's a charming "Peace" mural out back, designed and executed by the children with materials and coaching from the advertising firm of Goodby, Silverstein & Partners (who created, among others, the "Got Milk?" campaign).

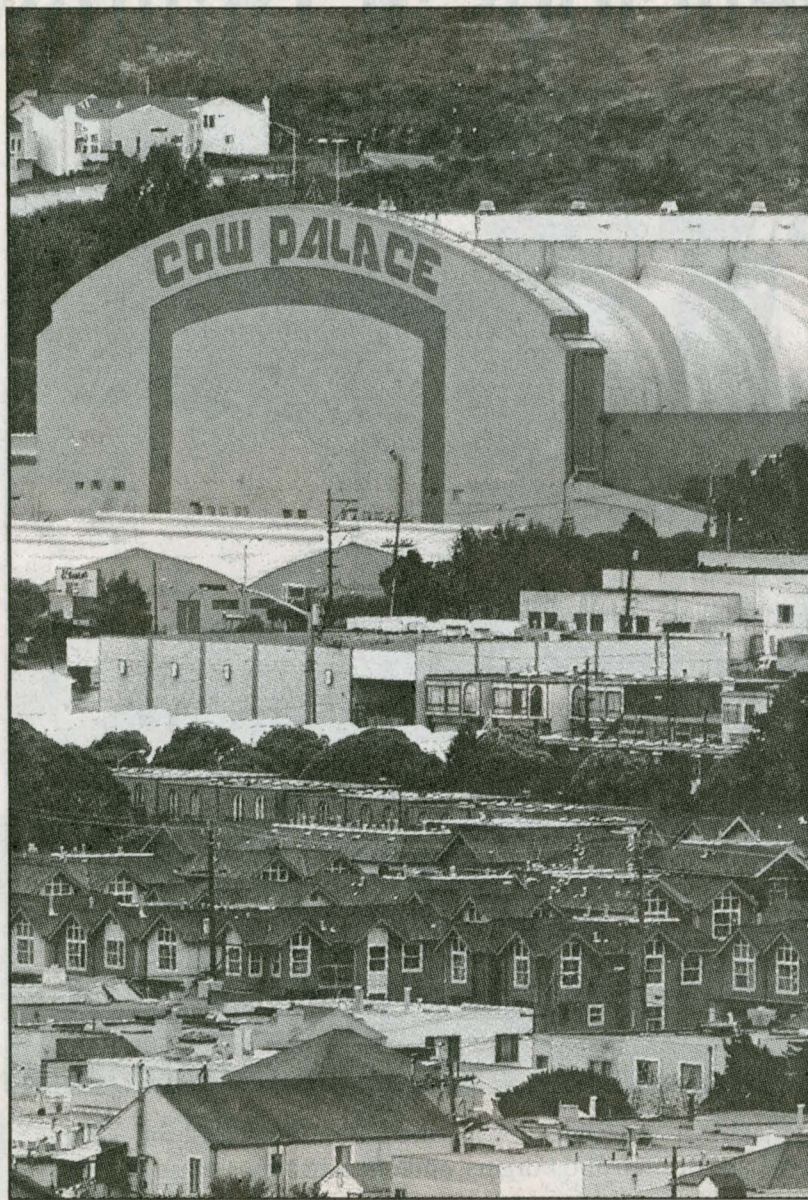
"Our association with the school has been just as good for us as for them," says founder Jeff Goodby, who occasionally volunteers to read to the youngsters. "Everybody loved the experience."

"Test scores are up, something we're proud of," Chao says. "And I see a new spirit. Everybody is excited about working together."

One of the neighborhood's biggest changes is the smart, pastel look of the Sunnydale public housing project.

A decade ago, the area had reached a low point: crumbling structures scrawled with graffiti, garbage in the paths and hallways and a sense of futility and desperation in what jobless teenagers nicknamed the "Swampy Desert."

But thanks to a major infusion of money, things are definitely looking up, says Michael Roetzer, spokesman for the San Francisco Housing Authority. He says crime is down



JOHN O'HARA / The Chronicle

**A MOO LOOK:** Visitacion Valley overlooks the Cow Palace. The brown townhouses are built on the site of the old Geneva Towers.

about 47 percent in Sunnydale, currently home to 1,963 people living in 767 units.

But while crime may be down, Billy Ray Smith, a San Francisco police officer, says drug dealing remains a major problem. Crack houses have sprung up all over Vis Valley, and unemployment among young people, particularly African Americans, remains high, he says.

Sunnydale was built in 1941 as housing for low-income residents, including shipyard workers at Hunters Point. Its population is now about two-thirds African American, with the balance divided among Asians, Caucasians and Latinos.

Roetzer says that, since 1998, San Francisco police officers have shared security duties at Sunnydale — and three other high-crime projects — with a Peninsula firm, Personal Protective Services. The substation is at 1652 Sunnydale Ave., behind a rose-colored building that houses a community center and a Boys and Girls Club.

"Since 1997, we've spent about \$19 million modernizing and improving the units," Roetzer says.

"We've done what we can with the money allotted to us, and my sense is there's a new spirit of community. Vis Valley people feel safer."

Safer and definitely better housed. Since the demolition of the Geneva Towers in 1998, two large housing developments have sprung up north and south of Sunnydale Avenue, with former residents of Geneva Towers given priority.

The 92-unit Britton Courts opened about five months ago at a cost of \$16.7 million. The second is Heritage Homes, with 148 units built at a cost of \$27.3 million; it is now about half-completed, with existing livable units.

One new Heritage resident is Chana Kennedy, who used to live in Geneva Towers with her three daughters, then spent a few years in Daly City. She says she's pleased now to be back in San Francisco.

"Everybody is excited at how we've been working together," says Kennedy, who works at the Beacon Community Center, housed in Vis Valley Middle School.

The residential developments were sponsored by Mercy Housing

*"My sense is there's a new spirit of community. Vis Valley people feel safer."*

MICHAEL ROETZER, San Francisco Housing Authority

California, a nonprofit group founded by Catholic nuns, says spokeswoman Jane Graf.

She says funding for the modern apartments came from a variety of sources — Catholic Charities, HUD, the city and county of San Francisco, the AFL-CIO, the Bank of America and the California Housing Finance Agency — and that a community center is planned for the site of the old Geneva Towers.

Seniors have not been forgotten in the new building rush, Graf says.

Under construction on Raymond Avenue at Sawyer Street is the John King Senior Community, a 93-unit development scheduled to open next year at a cost of about \$14.6 million.

One of the oldest place-names in San Francisco, Visitacion Valley was named by Franciscan padres on July 2, 1777, the day Catholics then celebrated the Virgin Mary's visit to her pregnant cousin Elisabeth, soon to be the mother of John the Baptist.

Vis Valley was also the boyhood home of Dan White, one of the city's notorious villains. On Nov. 27, 1978, he crawled through a City Hall cellar window and shot and killed Mayor George Moscone and gay Supervisor Harvey Milk. The inept prosecution of the "Twinkie trial" and the assassin's light manslaughter sentence touched off "White Night," the most violent civil disturbance in San Francisco history.

Vis Valley resident Goldie Judge Precivale, a 56-year-old widowed grandmother, was White's first campaign manager a year before the slayings, when White ran for the Board of Supervisors in 1977 — San Francisco's first experience with district elections.

"I'm a little lady who got caught up in history," says the longtime community activist, who lives on Rutland Street.

Precivale soon bowed out of the campaign, having come to mistrust and fear the fireman, former cop and Vietnam veteran. She recalls a candidates' night when White snarled, "I know who my enemies are."

"I thought I was seeing Hitler again," she says. In Precivale's view, the City Hall murders cast a pall over Vis Valley because Dan White was a local boy — he had grown up



# Visitacion Valley

in a house on Hahn Street across from McLaren Park.

"Dan White was identified with this neighborhood, and the tragedy stays with us," she says. "Crime may be way down compared to the 1980s, but I'm still frightened by all the sirens and gunshots in the night."

Shelley's Ice Cream at 144 Leland Ave., the shop she and her late husband, Roland Precivale, used to run, is now Sin Fung Video, one of a dozen or more Chinese businesses.

"The whole community is in reformation," she says. "What we're lacking these days is leadership. District elections might make a difference — a return to neighborhood power."

The hot controversy in Vis Valley these days is the humongous store Home Depot wants to build on Bayshore Boulevard, a 108,000-square-foot structure replacing the abandoned Schlage Lock factory.

Joe Luccini, 87, a lifelong resident, remembers when every family had a vegetable garden and most raised chickens and rabbits.

The retired machinist and his wife, Emma, whom he married in 1940, see nothing wrong with the Home Depot project. "I can't see what harm it can do," Luccini says. "I think it would be an asset."

But activists supported by Supervisor Tom Ammiano want the store reduced to 50,000 square feet. They say the 13-acre site in Little Hollywood, just east of Vis Valley, should become a "transit village" near Caltrain's existing Bayshore stop, with smaller stores, high-density housing, a library and a terminus of the projected Third Street light rail line.

"Things are looking up around

## FUN DAY

Neighborhood Day 2000 combines music, food, fun — and free physical exams and immunizations for children. 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. tomorrow, 325 Leland Ave., near Cora St. Call Christina Wong at (415) 274-2760, Ext. 308.

here," says Smith, the police officer, who has a tasty side job: He and his wife, Shirel, own Shirel's Soul Food Shack at 107 Leland Ave., close to an unmarked AIDS hospice.

Smith supports the Home Depot, which he thinks would spur economic development. But what Vis Valley really needs, he says, is a supermarket; the Safeway closed 20 years ago, and since then, residents have had to drive miles to the nearest supermarket on Mission Street.

Meanwhile, Friends of the Urban Forest is recruiting volunteers for a tree-planting project in Visitacion Valley.

It will be a labor of love for volunteer coordinator Jeanette Tolentino-Hill, who grew up in a house on Teddy Street and went to local schools.

"Vis Valley has improved so much since I lived here," says Tolentino-Hill, 27. "It was scary, just walking by Geneva Towers and the Sunnydale project. A lot of my friends were mugged and robbed."

"More trees would enhance the neighborhood. Trees make people feel safer, and give a better sense of community."

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