



PHOTO BY NEELA BANERJEE

# Forgotten Valley

BY NEELA BANERJEE AND JANET NG

Visitacion Valley Community Center Executive Director Julie Kavanagh, left, speaks to Alice Young, 50-year resident of the Valley. The community center is a place where seniors and children come together as a community.



PHOTO BY NEELA BANERJEE

It's barely 9:00 a.m., and the Visitacion Valley Community Center (VVCC) is already bustling. On one side of the two-building complex, a number of seniors are lined up with various forms in hand to get help at Senior Central, a satellite office set up by the San Francisco Commission on Aging. Others are waiting to be let in, 15 at a time, to a reduced price farmers market that is part of the Center's food distribution program. On the other side of the blacktop playground, children ranging in age from 4 to 12 have begun to gather for the ongoing day-care program, with an enrollment of over 200.

Julie Kavanagh, VVCC's executive director, gives a haphazard tour of the 83-year-old center, pointing out the ceramics studio and showing off a newly refurbished kitchen where a community lunch is cooked 365 days a year. Kavanagh steps into one of the classrooms where a citizenship class will be held in an hour. The room is already half full of Asian seniors, who sit with their thin citizenship workbooks in front of them, animatedly talking to one another. When they see her, most enthusiastically shout, "Hello, Julie." She replies: "Ni Hao Ma."

"They come early every day," Kavanagh says. "They study together and socialize before class starts. I think it is really great for them."

Kavanagh continues her tour around the Center, ending up in the large multi-purpose room where the produce is piled on folding tables. For five years, volunteers from the Center have been going to nearby farmers' markets before dawn to get whatever the farmers are willing to donate. They sell the produce at the center for pennies. Asian, Latino, African American and white shoppers pick through the wilted piles of lettuce and cardboard boxes of greens.

"We have the market three times a week," Ka-

vanagh says, standing back and greeting volunteers and shoppers alike. Most of the people who approach her don't seem to speak English and Kavanagh says she speaks barely any Chinese. But she manages to communicate to them with her wide smile and a warm pat on the back.

"The people in this community really need places like this," she says, "places where they can come to feel safe and learn about one another, get past the barriers that cause a lot of the problems."

This demolition of barriers through communication and coalition-building is exactly what a consortium of community members, activists and service providers hope to do in Visitacion Valley — an isolated neighborhood in southeast San Francisco that has been plagued by high crime rates, uneasy racial tensions, and lack of access to services and institutional support. Major demographic shifts in the past 20 years have brought more and more Asian Americans into Visitacion Valley. While many African Americans are moving outside of the city, large numbers of Chinese immigrants are drawn to the Valley's affordability. In an era of stratospheric real estate prices, a two bedroom/one bath house in the Valley now goes for \$350,000 to \$400,000 — still, the cheapest in the city. With a new community-minded supervisor in place, the beginnings of serious dialogue between the different groups, and more service organizations turning their heads toward this corner of the city, Visitacion Valley is poised on the brink of major positive changes.

## CHANGING HANDS

First inhabited by Costanoan Indians, Visitacion Valley has always been characterized by changing populations. In 1777, Franciscan friars traveling from San Diego to San Francisco's Presidio got lost in the fog and camped out in the hills just east of the highway. In the morning, they looked over the serene valley next to the bay and celebrated mass for the feast of *Visitacion*, in cel-

ebration of the Blessed Mother. Visitacion Valley was born.

For much of the 1800s, the Valley served as a pasture for the cattle of the Presidio and Mission Dolores.

The United States Army took over the nearby Southern Pacific Railroad Yard in the early 1900s, expanding its operations and bringing many new jobs to the area. At this time, Visitacion Valley was populated with mainly Italian immigrants. During World War II, a great deal of military housing for African Americans was built in the area.

"Back then they were the new people and it was a rough adjustment period," Kavanagh said.

From the 1950s, with U.S. acquisitions in the South Pacific, a large Samoan population began to settle in the Valley. In the 1970s, Southeast Asian refugees began to move in, and from the early 1980s, there has been a steady influx of Chinese immigrants.

"There are always new groups coming in, changing the way things are and having to go through adjusting," Kavanagh said. "That's just the nature of this place."

In the 1970s, African Americans made up some 70 percent of the population of the Valley. By 1990, Chinese Americans alone made up over a quarter of the population, and today, Asian Americans are estimated to be over 50 percent, while African American numbers have dropped to less than 20 percent.

In 1980, homes in Visitacion Valley were under \$100,000. Realtor Kathy Kline-Saunders, who grew up in the Valley, said it is the last place in the city where you can get an affordable price for a good home. But even here, real estate prices have been going up — at an even greater pace than the rest of the city. Kline-Saunders estimates that Visitacion Valley homes have increased in price at a 5 to 10 percent higher rate than the rest of the city. She attributes this increase to the large influx of Asian American buy-



ers, who have been making the Valley their home.

"There are all these ideas that Chinese people are rich because they are buying their homes," Kavanagh says. "They don't see what is happening on moving day when 20 mattresses are being moved into the house and no other furniture because the whole family — generations — have pooled their money and moved in together. And everyone who can work is working two jobs to pay it off. Americans just don't live that way."

## NOT ALL QUIET

"The problems facing Visitacion Valley are very basic human problems," Judith Sandoval says. Sandoval is the executive director of the Geneva Valley Development Corporation (GVDC), a nonprofit organization addressing the Valley's major issues.

Statistics for Visitacion Valley from Claritas Incorporated and the 1990 Census found that 36 percent of the population are under the poverty level, 13 percent are unemployed and some 17 percent of the population are uninsured. Here, up to 25 percent have little or no English language capabilities. According to the Department of Public Health, Visitacion Valley also has low child immunization rates — an 11 percent teen pregnancy rate, com-

ing pushed out by property-hungry Asian Americans.

Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA), a Chinatown-based civil rights organization, opened an office in Visitacion Valley around this time.

Christina Wong, who heads the Valley office, said that they had been encouraged by city government and other community-based organizations to do work there. CAA opened an office in The Village, which is a coalition of community based organizations (CBOs) that were once housed in Geneva Towers, and since the destruction of that building, have moved into a space across the street.

CAA's move into The Village was a strategic plan to not only provide needed language services to Asian American clients, but also to work on breaking down the prevailing stereotype that The Village was only

ment, mainly in construction, hotel and janitorial work. But Wong and other service providers are also tackling more complex issues, namely the seemingly continuous cycle of crime, violence and stereotyping that divides the community.

## FEAR IN THE VALLEY

"This is not a safe neighborhood," Kavanagh says matter-of-factly. "The new immigrants, especially the Chinese immigrants, are seen as vulnerable. They don't look people in the eyes, they don't fight back, they don't speak English — they are seen as easy targets."

Visitacion Valley has one of the highest crime rates in the city. A police round-up published in the latest issue of the community newspaper *The Grapevine* show some 15 strong-arm or break-in robberies in one week, many during daylight hours.

At the Visitacion Valley Community Center, everyone has a story about a purse snatching, a robbery or an assault. Eighty-six-year old Alice Young, who has lived in Visitacion Valley for over 50 years, shows off her precautions: "Look at this, I wear my keys on a chain around my neck, carry my money in a money bag under my shirt. Isn't that terrible?"

George Lo,

only problem is, two years ago someone came to my house and killed my wife."

Lo's wife was killed around Chinese New Year's, when robberies are abundant because of customs of exchanging cash and jewelry. The police suggested that the perpetrator might have been someone inside the Chinese community, and that she was murdered so she would not be able to identify the culprit. Lo agrees that this may have been the case.

"American people don't keep money in their house, but they think Chinese people do," Lo says sadly, looking around the community room. "She was here shopping in the morning and by night she was gone."

Visitacion Valley is policed by the Ingleside Police Department, which has about four bilingual Cantonese speaking officers. Wong of CAA said that there was a bilingual officer who used to patrol the neighborhood regularly, which really made the residents feel safe. But lately, the Ingleside department has had only enough resources to staff a beat in the Valley four nights a week.

"It is really hard to track crime numbers there, especially among the Chinese American community because they don't always report the crime," Ingleside Police Captain Martha Ash says.

The reported crime at the end of

Ash recognizes that the lack of Chinese-speaking officers is a real problem, and says the administration is aware of that fact as well. One of the issues affecting the staffing, she says, is that officers are allowed to pick which district to serve once they gain some seniority. That leads to bilingual officers moving around a lot.

Tireless Visitacion Valley community activist Marlene Tran, dubbed "the angel of immigrants" by the Chinese-language newspapers, moved into the neighborhood in the early 1980s because of the needs she saw in the community. Today, she continues on her crusade. Issues of personal safety and language-access are at the top of her list. Tran points a finger directly at the lack of police presence and lack of bilingual officers and says that more should be done to make sure the Valley is being protected and served.

"There are so many things that happen to you if you don't speak English," Tran, an ESL teacher for 30 years, says. "It is the city's job to supply this access to these people. They pay taxes, they certainly count."

Tran's fierce manner makes her one of the first people new immigrants turn to when they have a problem. She says she used to keep a notebook full of the incidents that people would tell her about — the



PHOTO BY NEELA BANERJEE

Immigrant Rights activist Marlene Tran

pared to the city's 3 percent — and 28 percent of the city's cancer deaths. Combined with high rates of crime, Visitacion Valley is a microcosm of disenfranchised America.

Three years ago, when the Geneva Towers housing projects were demolished to make way for new townhouses, African American residents got first- second- and third-priority for the new housing. Race relations came to a head in the community with Asian Americans saying they had no access to funds or services that were coming into the community and blacks complaining about be-

serving the African American community.

"The groups that were there, like Viz Valley Jobs, Education and Training, always had an interest in serving the entire community but they just didn't have the capacity," Wong said, "language capacity or cultural skill capacity."

Wong said that when CAA first opened their office they had to do a lot of outreach to bring Asian Americans out, but now the Village is serving a more diverse community, more reflective of Visitacion Valley. CAA focuses its efforts in job place-

an elderly Chinese man who emigrated from Indonesia in 1974, mills around the produce market. He has a long, unruly beard, a contagious smile and speaks freely about how at first his life in the United States was hard because he could not speak English. He worked to put his children through school. Now, they are successful and he describes his beautiful twin grandchildren. In a way, Lo symbolizes the Asian American dream. Lo comes to the Community Center every day to shop and exercise and meet with friends.

Then his smile fades a little, "The

last year skyrocketed, according to Ash, which she sees as a very good thing.

She says: "I think that has more to do with us establishing a more trusting relationship with the people in that community."

assaults and robberies and slurs — but she quickly ran out of paper. Tran says that Asian immigrants suffer not only at the hands of criminals because of the language barrier but also in the legal system. She is currently working with a Chinese man who was sentenced to jail for nine months for abalone hunting. He caught two over the legal limit.

Tran also believes that there needs to be stronger protection of Asian Americans against hate crimes, that the current weak definition "doesn't address victims' rights when their physical attacks are ac-





PHOTO BY NEELA BANERJEE

Mainly Asian seniors shop at the Visitacion Valley Community Center's reduced produce market — held 3 times a week.

companied by racial remarks."

Captain Ash hasn't seen official hate crimes reported on a regular basis. She says the crimes directed toward the Asian American community are more "subtly racist."

"This doesn't negate the racial component," Ash says. "There are racially motivated crimes but not hate crimes. It is a very important distinction."



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY JENNIE SUE  
BACKGROUND PHOTO BY NEELA BANERJEE

#### PREVENTING RACE RIOTS

Last year, CAA mediated the aftermath of an incident at Visitacion Valley Middle School. According to Wong, two African American students beat up an 11-year old Chinese American student.

"This had a ripple effect in the community," Wong says.

CAA guided the parents of the Chinese American student through the Youth Guidance Center process, helping them get language assistance. This incident brought the two communities to a head — with some saying that it was just a

fight between kids that was blown out of proportion.

"This is where the issues get really complicated," Wong says.

One of the main places that violent or racist incidents are seen is on public transportation. The stories that have been reported to CAA are typically an Asian American male or female being beaten up by a group of African American youth.

"There are so many different issues from just one of these incidents," Wong says. "Like, how do we prevent the youth from perpetrating the violence, and why is the bus driver not helping? Then, on a broader level, it is fulfilling the stereotype of Asian Americans as victims and African Americans as the perpetrators."

Intergroup Clearinghouse (IC), a San Francisco nonprofit focusing on inter-racial and inter-group relations, has been working in Visitacion Valley for the past year on a program called the Hate Violence Prevention Initiative.

"There are not a lot of overt incidences," Jill Tregor of IC says. "But the education we are doing is bringing people together and preventing what could blow up."

IC is working with the two African American students who were involved in the altercation with the Chinese American boy at the middle school. They are doing a restorative justice program with these youth and hope to place these students in an Asian American CBO to do volunteer work.

Wong, Tregor, Kavanagh of the Visitacion Valley Community Cen-



PHOTO BY NEELA BANERJEE

District 10 Supervisor Sophie Maxwell

ter, and many others are all part of a wide coalition of activists and service providers who have begun to meet monthly to discuss issues in the community. At first, meetings were held to keep everyone up to date on their work and concerns. Soon, however, a real dialogue began.

Wong says that at first she was apprehensive to bring up the MUNI violence and the middle school incident.

"Everyone had been so into working together and the all the racial tensions seemed to be put aside, even though everyone knows they exist," Wong says. "They are hard to talk about. But bringing it up really seemed to open up a dialogue about race that is so important to have."

#### NEW SUPERVISOR

Hand-in-hand with this community coalition comes new Supervisor

Sophie Maxwell. Maxwell's vision for leadership is entrenched in a grassroots, open-door approach. Both her aides, Greg Asay and Sarah He, came to her from community organizing backgrounds. Maxwell has taken on the major environmental issues that face District 10, especially concerning pollution in the Bayview, and passed legislation on limiting diesel exhaust-spewing server farms.

The supervisor has made a big effort to connect with the large Asian American population in her district — and lured He away from her job at the Chinese Progressive Association because she wanted somebody who was really involved in the Chinese American community.

Maxwell speaks passionately about the changes she wants in Visitacion Valley. She recognizes that safety is the No. 1 concern.

"People need to feel safe," Maxwell says. "Effective policing is not about the number of cops but how you use them."

Maxwell was pushing for more services in Visitacion Valley, and with add-backs from the budget, she was able to fund a childcare center that educates monolingual community members about child development.

Northeast Medical Services (NEMS), the largest medical clinic in the United States serving a primarily Asian American population, also opened a fully-functional clinic in Visitacion Valley this year. The clinic hopes to tackle the high rates of diabetes and cardiovascular disease that affect the Asian American population.

Maxwell is also hoping to work with the community to bring more business development to the area. The Slag Lock factory is a state clean-up site monitored by the Department of Toxic Substances Control. Maxwell plans to have community meetings in the future to decide what kind of development could go there. Maxwell also talks about bringing a full supermarket to the area that would be culturally-sensitive so Chinese Americans wouldn't have to go to Chinatown to shop.

At the heart of things, Maxwell wants to bring the community together.

"The more people talk and mingle and meet each other, the more we realize that we are all in this together," Maxwell says. "Even with the language barriers. When you go there on a Sunday, who do you see? You see Asian grandmothers with babies and you see African American grandmothers with the children. Because that is who is raising them. We share this strong sense of family."

Community uniting events are in the works, like traditional dragon boat races that would start on the Embarcadero and end along the bay in District 10. Maxwell thinks that some kind of larger celebration of culture that everyone can enjoy will be a way to break down the tensions. Another idea she has is a community "Call of the Drums" where African drummers and traditional Asian drummers would come together.

"We want to bring people together," Maxwell said. "That is power — people have the power."

When looking at the shifting demographics in her district, especially the dropping number of African Americans, Maxwell says that she hopes tackling the larger problems will bring positive change all around. She is working to improve the schools by creating a place where youth can channel their energy and receive encouragement and care.

"If I work on youth violence issues, then maybe people won't move," Maxwell says. "If I work on the real problem of racism — that is what I see as the problem, not one group leaving and another coming in. It is racism and poverty at the bottom line. There are Asian gangs because they don't feel connected. There are African American gangs because they don't feel connected."

"I was at a meeting and people were talking about how some people get more than others, more funds and more this and that. But none of us get more — none of the people in that room get as much as white people. All they have to do is keep us fighting amongst the scraps. We need to understand the nature of the problem and where it is coming from."

#### THE FUTURE

On any given afternoon, the Visitacion Valley Middle School cafeteria — home base of the Visitacion Valley Beacon Center — is full of Asian American and African American youth making paper maché art projects, learning to juggle, and dancing. Here, the idea of racial tension seems pretty far removed.

The Visitacion Valley Beacon Center has programming for both youth and adults all year round. During the summer, the Beacon Center has up to 40 students a day involved in recreational and educational activities.

Veli Williams, 22, who grew up in the area, runs the youth program.

"When I look at this program I think about when I was coming up," Williams says. "You either went home after school or you got in trouble. I think it is really important for them to have some kind of alternative."

Williams also coordinates fieldtrips for the mostly middle school students who are in the Beacon Center's programs. These trips range from a day at Great America to a fishing trip with the San Francisco Police Department.

"I want to show these kids that there is so much beyond just this neighborhood, this community," Williams says.

Williams also works with the nonprofit Asian American Communities for Education (AAACE) to educate the youth about college. When AAACE started, its program was aimed at Asian American youth. Recently, though, it has opened up to all children. This week, the kids will tour Stanford University.

"The idea is to get kids interested in college when they are in middle school, because now the trend is that they don't even want to go to

high school," Williams says.

Raymond Wong and Joseph Lutge, both 13, have lived in Visitacion Valley for most of their lives. Typical middle schoolers, they say the best part of summer school and the Beacon Center is getting to play basketball and the snacks. Wong was born in Chinatown but his family moved to Visitacion Valley when he was 7. Both boys have nothing negative to say about their school, agreeing that they like the teachers and the people. They both shake their heads at the mention of racial tensions.

"There isn't really anything like that here," Wong says, before running off to play.

Williams says that the tensions are more turf-based.

"Even though they tore down Geneva Towers — some of that tension still exists because it is the same people who now live in Heritage Homes. Otherwise, people seem to get along," she says. Williams believes that last year's violent incident in the middle school was just a fight between kids, and that the communities blew it up into a racial incident.

"Kids are kids, they are going to get in fights. There are racial tensions but nothing too crazy at all," Williams says.

Back at the Visitacion Valley Community Center, a group of Asian, Latino and African American kids launch water balloons across the blacktop at Michael Jones, an African American man with graying dreadlocks who has run the children's program for the past 21 years. The kids scream and laugh as Jones dodges the wet bursts.

"I love this neighborhood," he says. "because of the diversity and community that is here." As he runs into the middle of the playground, the children all look adoringly after him.

Inside, Kavanagh sits with 86-year-old Young, who is talking about how her son lives in Burlingame and wants her to move in with him. When asked if she is going to move, she adamantly replies: "Of course not! I've lived here for 50 years, this is my home. This is my home."

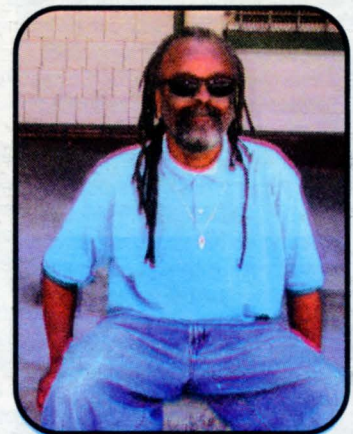


PHOTO BY NEELA BANERJEE

Michael Jones has run the children's program at the Visitacion Valley Community Center for 21 years.

Contact Neela Banerjee at  
nbanerjee@asianweek.com