

Chatsworth neighborhood a global village

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Take a walk down the 20100 block of Marilla Street in Chatsworth and you see kids playing dodgeball while their parents hover over barbecue grills and set up picnic tables for an early start to the Fourth of July.

The 12-home, tree-lined, cul-de-sac built in the early 1960s has the all-American feel of the Cleavers' old neighborhood in the TV series "Leave It To Beaver."

But the Beav and his brother, Wally, and their parents, Ward and June, never lived on a block like this.

And that's too bad, the people on Marilla Street say. They would have been so much richer and wiser if they had.

"I grew up on this street in the '60s when it was all white," says Chuck Bunnell, who now lives with his wife, Beth, in his parents' old home.

"It was nice back then, but it's much better now. More interesting."

Interesting and better because when Chuck looks out his front window every morning he sees the world, not just a small slice of America that looks like him.

He sees a miniature United Nations of families going off to work and school — families willing to share their culture and heritage with him, and he with them.

Living next door to the Bunnells are Ken and Karen Kim from Korea and their three children. Ken's an accountant, and in charge of grilling the hot dogs and hamburgers at the neighborhood barbecue.

A few houses from Ken live Michael and Merlee Uyangua and their three children. Michael's an engineer born in Nigeria; Merlee was born in the Philippines.

At the end of the cul-de-sac live Armando and Gloria Hernandez from Colombia with their two kids, Christian and Alice. Both parents work at a local hydraulics firm.

Up the block, Radha Ranganathan from India, a physics professor at nearby California State University, Northridge, lives next to Carmen Basagoitia from El Salvador, a day-care worker.

What you do for a living and how much you earn aren't important on Marilla Street, these neighbors say. It's who you are and what you bring to the party that counts.

Friendliness, diversity and an understanding that it doesn't matter where you were born or what your last name is, because you're living in America now.

The hot dogs and hamburgers are for everyone. So enjoy.

Recently, neighbors on this block all sat down at a party with their hot dogs, hamburgers and samplings of native foods from each of their countries.

They talked with their American-born neighbors John and Kathleen Lindsay, Betty Jenkins and Eddie Applegate, Pam and Chad Watson, and the Bunnells about why this mini U.N. neighborhood works so well.

"It was always a warm, friendly neighborhood with lots of kids playing in the street, but in many ways it seems even more friendly now," says Kathleen Lindsay, whose husband, John, is a retired CSUN mathematics professor.

They moved to this street in 1964, soon after the homes were built amid old orange grove fields that quickly gave way to more development.

The San Fernando Valley was a hot market — the place in Los Angeles for young, mainly Caucasian families to raise children on a small paycheck.

The area had a lot of things going for it, but diversity wasn't one of them. Today, diversity is everything. You can either fight it or embrace it.

The 20100 block of Marilla Street embraced it.

Betty Jenkins walked across the street and knocked on Michael Uyangua's front door the day after the family from Nigeria moved onto her block in 1998.

"I could see him peeking out from behind the blinds wondering who I was, should he open the door," Betty recalls.

"I thought as the first black in a still-mainly all-white neighborhood, somebody should welcome his family to our street."

The next day, Michael and his family stood in the middle of Marilla Street meeting all their neighbors — the Kims from Korea and the Hernandez family from Colombia, and the American-born Lindsays and Bunnells who had lived here just about forever.

"It was as if we had been their neighbors for years, not days," Michael remembers. "When people are so friendly and welcome you like that, well, it makes you more friendly and caring.

"It makes you realize that you've moved onto a special, unique street."

Three days after Michael's youngest son, Jeremiah, was born, the first person he walked across the street to tell was Betty Jenkins.

"This is my son," Michael said, when she opened the door. "I wanted you to see him first."

It's just a little story, Betty and Michael said, sitting at the neighborhood barbecue. But it's an important one if you want to understand what makes Marilla Street work.

By 6:30 p.m. at the block party barbecue, Chad Watson had broken out his guitar and was ready to lead his neighbors in a few songs.

The country-western singer who toured with the late Freddie Fender asked if they had any suggestions.

Yeah, they did, they said, gathering their kids and grandkids around them.

A few minutes later, the 20100 block of Marilla Street was belting out "This Land Is Your Land," followed by "God Bless America."
