



Urban Removal

by Tom Rippe

Investment dollars are pouring into the neighborhoods between downtown L.A. and the University of Southern California. Developers are scrambling to cash in on the markets for lofts and student housing. But long-time residents are being priced out of their homes. They're trying to find ways to improve their neighborhood without losing their neighbors.

Everyone says Pastor Brian is the man to talk to about the changes in the neighborhood. He's at St. Mark's Lutheran on Vermont and 36th, and has been there for 30 years. In that time he's seen a lot of people come, but recently he's seen more people go, including a member of his congregation who was a manager at a nearby apartment complex. "Pastor, he said, a lot of people in our apartment have been evicted. They say they're trying to clear out the riffraff. Then about two weeks later he came back and he said, Pastor I've been evicted. I guess I'm riffraff too," he said.

Pastor Brian's congregation is mostly working class, mostly black and Hispanic, and they've been in the neighborhood for decades. But neighborhood residents are finding it more and more difficult to stay. "If you go and ask that you need to rent for your family and your children. They say USC students only. You cannot move there because most of the people who are renting want to rent to USC students. Of course, because they pay more than us," said Ana Ruth Varela, a long-time resident of the area.

“A lot of people are upset by what’s a normal transition for this community. But it’s a necessary process for the growth, not only for the community, but for the university,” said Charles Foster, a St. Marks member who grew up in the neighborhood and studied engineering at USC back in the 70s.

The changes aren’t just affecting St. Marks. Community activist Davin Corona says it’s also affecting the schools. Norwood Elementary has been losing students. This in the overcrowded L.A. school system. “They lost 150 students. And they were asking the question: How is this? Well, we worked with them and we were figuring out that there’s a lot of families being evicted. And they just leave from one day to another because the landlord will tell you verbally, ‘Hey, you gotta go tomorrow.’ And folks don’t know. They’ll just take off.”

Corona doesn’t blame students for wanting to live close to campus. Instead he points the finger at unscrupulous landlords who often take advantage of the students. “A lot of these businesses are very savvy. What they’ll do is they’ll promote student housing. They’ll call it student housing, and a lot of students will think Oh, it’s USC student housing, because they’ll also use the same colors as the USC logo.”

Activist Gabby Gonzales says the familiar student housing banners are the terror of the neighborhood. “I think a lot of community members fear USC students. As soon as they see an apartment or house being rehabbed it’s like, “Oh, we’re next to be evicted.”

Her colleague, Nancy Ibrahim, says these landlords give USC a bad name. Ibrahim says the university needs to be more active in the community. “They need to be

more frank with the community, to disclose what their master plan actually is. Otherwise a developer... is not distinct, from the community's perspective, from the university."

USC is undeniably the major economic player in the neighborhood, and has the most influence over the direction of developments there. Residents hope that development doesn't drive them out. And activists insist that what's good for the neighborhood is also what's good for the university.