

## A neighborhood reclaims its name

By Linda Wilson, *Making Connections-San Antonio* Diarist

San Antonio's far West Side was once noted for the quality of its farms. Drawn by rich soils, early Belgian settlers developed truck farms that fed a growing population. As the city expanded, the Belgian farmlands became postwar subdivisions, meeting growing demand for housing to serve employees of nearby Kelly Air Force Base. New immigrants from Mexico and other parts of South Texas moved into the area.

When first platted, one early subdivision north of Kelly Air Force Base was named "*Los Jardines*," celebrating the pastoral character of the area. Time passed, and the name was all but forgotten. Now, thanks to the community organizing efforts of *Making Connections-San Antonio*, Benitia Family Center and FLOR, "*Los Jardines*" is reclaiming its name, and the neighborhood is taking on new life. What's more, organizing efforts are spawning the growth of other community-based organizations.

"We found out about the name *Los Jardines* when we started researching the possibility of becoming an official San Antonio neighborhood organization," says Irma DeLeon, a resident community organizer who has spent almost all her life in the area. "It was the original name of the area. We were surprised, since no one remembered the name, but we liked it."



Benitia Family Center, established in 1994 by the Missionary Sisters of Divine Providence, has become a focal point for organizing efforts in this area of West Side San Antonio. Benitia reaches out to neighborhood residents with a comprehensive program of adult education, youth programs, counseling and community outreach.

In recent years, the area suffered from the closure of Kelly Air Force Base, as well as from loss of manufacturing jobs, when Levi Strauss, Sony and other companies closed plants in the area. Benitia helps residents retrain and cope with changes brought about by outsourcing and economic downturn.

Benitia's efforts received a boost when The Annie E. Casey Foundation's *Making Connections* came to San Antonio in 2000. Goals of the two groups converged. Eventually, a small seed grant enabled Benitia to expand its capacity to mentor and support a number of separate resident organizations that connect families from the surrounding neighborhood.

Sister Carmen Sanchez, head of Benitia Family Center and a life-long area resident, was skeptical of *Making Connections* when she was first contacted.

"Initially, my first concern for Casey was whether this would be another foundation coming in with all the answers for the people," Sister Carmen recalls. "When I found out Casey was open to looking at strength in people and investing in residents, then I wanted to be part of the table."

Sister Carmen is especially pleased that The Annie E. Casey Foundation has invested in training leaders through *Making Connections*. Leaders she identified through her work with Benitia have been encouraged and nurtured to move forward with goals and projects they identified for their communities. From this leadership, two groups, Edgewood Family Network (EFN) and Families Leading Others to Rebirth (FLOR), have been formed.

Leaders learned about such things as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and recruited neighbors to take advantage of tax relief provided by the EITC program. They are working more closely with city departments, such as City of San Antonio's Neighborhood Action Division.

FLOR, centering its work around Benitia Family Center, is dedicated to beautifying and improving *Los Jardines* neighborhood. There are neighborhood sweeps to clear out trash, volunteer efforts to paint out graffiti, and help for bringing homes into compliance with city codes.

"Every two months, we involve our own youth and city probationers in painting over graffiti," says Sister Carmen. "Once the residents see us, they are more disposed to erase the graffiti that is around them. Now, they are now keeping their areas clean themselves."

More than physical improvements are happening because of the organizing efforts. FLOR developed its own Time Dollar group and interviewed neighbors to document oral histories of the area. People are more friendly and involved.

"I've lived in my neighborhood over 30 years," says Irma DeLeon, a single mother who has moved back to the neighborhood where she grew up. "I remember how it was when we were little, but the neighborhood changed. People were isolating themselves -getting dogs, window guards and chains. Since we started organizing, I've seen a change."

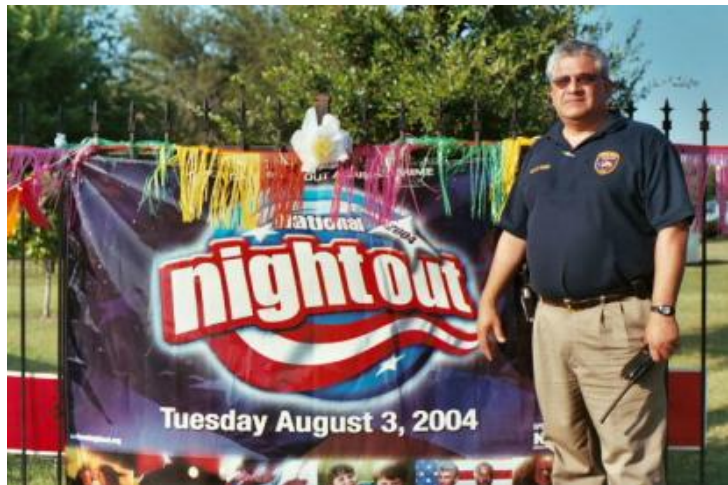


Leaders credit participation in the National Neighborhood Night Out (NNO) in August 2003 as an exciting step in the growth of their efforts. The event took on a truly multicultural flavor when residents around Benitia Family Center - mostly Mexican American - joined forces with the members of nearby Macedonia Baptist Church, whose membership is mostly African American.

Sister Carmen says, “Macedonia came in after *Making Connections*’ outreach. Had it not been for Casey, we wouldn’t have done the National Night Out. Macedonia brought the idea for National Night Out to the table. Irma DeLeon and others walked door to door, recruiting neighbors.”

After joining forces, the two groups turned their National Night Out into a big block party, barbecue and parade, drawing some 300 participants.

By August 2004, the NNO parade and block party had grown bigger, becoming an educational forum, as well as a fun event. Along with the hot dogs and entertainment, there were informational tables on topics such as fighting gangs, improving health, registering voters and encouraging education. After the parade, children climbed aboard Police and Fire Department trucks, and a local Spanish radio station sent its remote broadcasting crew.



*Los Jardines*’ involvement with National Night Out is setting a model for other neighborhood groups. Mrs. Guadalupe Iruegas, another *Making Connections* leader, organized an NNO celebration for the senior retirement apartment complex where she resides.

Now that they have found their name and recognize themselves as *Los Jardines* neighborhood, leaders want to make it official. They’ve applied to the City Planning Department to establish legal boundaries and recognition under the City’s Master Plan process. Once *Los Jardines*

becomes a recognized neighborhood, they can develop their own master plan for the community and arrest neighborhood deterioration.

Although Los Jardines is not yet recognized as an official Neighborhood Association by the City of San Antonio, it is recognized in the city as a very viable and dynamic neighborhood organization. Los Jardines is invited to the table by the City Neighborhood Planning Department whenever there is a petition for rezoning in the neighborhood.

Sister Carmen speaks positively about the future of her community and its residents.

“People have a lot of strength and experience. We see new leaders developing with so much potential,” she says. “I have been affirmed in my belief in the residents -- to keep trusting the people.”