

# Living In A War Zone, Venice Beach Style

By Deborah Hastings

VENICE, Calif. (AP) - This is not the Venice you've heard about, where chainsaw jugglers and bikini-clad Rollerbladers are just regular members of life's passing parade.

This is a 1.1-square-mile war zone called Oakwood, a patch of Venice just steps from the world-famous boardwalk in which 11 people have been shot to death since September. And no one - not police, community groups or politicians - has any hope things will soon change.

Little attention has been paid to the fearsome turf war between Hispanic and black gangs in this drug-infested warren of gentrified bungalows and federally subsidized apartment complexes.

Such deadly facts aren't part of Venice's reputation as one of Southern California's biggest tourist meccas. To visitors, this is the land of sun, sand, celebrities and quirkiness. Two blocks from Oakwood's western edge, for example, sits Schatzi On Main, Arnold Schwarzenegger's trendy restaurant.

But daily life is out of control for many of the 9,500 residents in Oakwood, a dense melting pot of Hispanics, blacks, Asians and whites.

Frightened parents keep their children out of school. Residents don't walk after dark. Community groups are trying to end the killing, but even they fight over what is best.

Oakwood represents Los Angeles at its worst. Predominantly minority and long ignored by the powers that be, many believe the area is only now receiving grudging attention because newly arrived white homeowners are threatened.

"This is disastrous down here. It's not a community you can live in," says Melvyn Hayward Sr., 44, a black community activist who has lived in Oakwood since the 1950s. "The Mexicans don't trust the blacks. The blacks don't trust the Mexicans. The whites, they rule everything because they got all the money." In reality, the gang war rules the area.

In Oakwood alone last year, there were 13 gang-related homicides. In 1992, there were six gang-related

murders in the entire 27-square-mile Pacific Division of the Los Angeles Police Department.

Since September, 45 shootings have been reported in the 12-block area, according to Sgt. Mario Munoz, who supervises the LAPD's Oakwood Task Force.

It doesn't help that there are almost as many rumors about the gang war as there are shootings, or that truce talks have fallen apart and many residents don't trust police.

Part of the problem is Oakwood's tortured racial history.

In the early 1900s, Venice founder Abbot Kinney roped off the area as a "servants' zone" to the futuristic enclave he modeled - canals included - after Italy's famous city. In those days, Oakwood was the only area within a mile of California's coastline where blacks could own property.

Hispanics moved in during the late 1940s, after construction of the Santa Monica Freeway ripped through their nearby neighborhood.

The two groups coexisted peacefully, ignored and avoided by white neighbors.

But the 1960s brought drugs and free love to Venice beach, and times changed. Social programs brought low-income housing to the minority area, where unemployment and racial tensions escalated.

Out-of-work residents found income supplying drugs to the hipsters. Gangs sprouted, drug abuse festered and, in the last decade, crack cocaine arrived.

According to Munoz, who spends a large part of each week patrolling the streets and coordinating surveillance, the gang war is about drug money and turf.

Three gangs, with a combined membership estimated by police at 500, are fighting for control of Oakwood and the nearby Mar Vista Gardens housing project. They are the Shoreline Crips, a black gang concentrated in Oakwood; Venice 13, a Hispanic gang also concentrated in Oakwood; and the Culver City Boys, a Hispanic group running Mar Vista.

Earlier this year, the Culver City Boys and Venice 13 set aside their own battle and united against the Shoreline Crips, who control Oakwood's lucrative drug trade. Munoz

says. "It's all about dope," he says. "It's all about dope and territory." At least two of the killings have been cases of mistaken identity.

Shawn Patterson, a 24-year-old black nursing assistant, was gunned down near his home Nov. 16 by two Hispanics, police say.

Braulio Rodriguez, a 19-year-old Hispanic busboy two months shy of getting married, was shot to death while sitting in his car five days later. Neither were gang members.

Most of the shootings are retaliatory. A Shoreline gets hit, and his comrades go looking for a Venice 13 member.

"Somebody might say, 'Yeah, that Venice 13 guy lives at such-and-such an address,' Munoz says while cruising Oakwood on a recent night. "So they drive by the house, shoot out the window, but they've got the wrong address." Now, that shooting must be avenged. And so it goes.

Nearly 30 community groups have sprouted in recent years. All demand an end to the shootings, but few work together and most have competing agendas.

Activists such as Hayward, who runs the Alice White Theater, a local acting company for children, put the black community first and point to racial injustices that predate many gang members' births.

Most politically savvy is Oakwood United, an intergovernmental group formed last February by Los Angeles City Council member Ruth Galanter, who represents Venice. The association is opening day care centers and tapping federal and local aid available to impoverished areas.

But residents complain that Galanter isn't doing enough - or saying enough - about fear and dying in Oakwood. Some say they expect more because Galanter knows Venice violence firsthand.

Just weeks before she was elected in 1987, a drug addict and reputed gang member broke into her Venice home and plunged a knife into her throat, severing a carotid artery and permanently damaging her voice box.

"What is it that people expect?" she asks. "I'm beginning to learn from reporters that people expect me to make more speeches."

"I did get stabbed. I hated it. I hated the recovery. I hated the whole business. But I can't put police out there (who) I can't pay for." By LAPD standards, there are many cops in Oakwood. The task force has 14 officers, and seven patrol cars solely dedicated to the tiny area.

The department's anti-gang unit and other divisions also help.

But even that isn't enough to stop the shootings. On Dec. 14, there were 18 patrol cars on the streets of Oakwood. A shooting occurred two blocks from a police cruiser.

Galanter and Munoz say the violence will never stop unless the neighborhood unites and gangsters go to jail.

For Theo Booker, a 20-year-old black man who moved from Venice to the suburbs to escape being shot, answers are not that simple.

"It's really bad out there for young men," he says. "It's easy to find trouble. You got the gangs. You can buy drugs anywhere." Booker, who works two jobs and wants to go to college, says he's not a gangbanger, but some of his friends are. Two have been killed in Oakwood.

"But you've got to understand what it's like for them. It's just like being part of a family. They love you. They'd die for you. They're going to back you up. You're going to stay with that."

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## WORD WISE

Q: I came across the word "proclivity" recently. Is it just a fancier term for leaning, as in, "He leans toward leftist regimes?"

A: Proclivity means an inclination or predisposition toward something, but especially toward something objectionable. Leaning is a synonym, but proclivity is considered more emphatic.

Send questions or comments for Word Wise to P.O. Box 4367, Orlando, Fla. 32802-4367.

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## EAGLES CALENDAR

(Continued From Page 9)

FEBRUARY 7 (Monday), 7:30 p.m., Men's Basketball, Shaw University at NCCU, McLendon-McDougal Gymnasium. Call 560-5170 or 560-6573.

FEBRUARY 8 (Tuesday), 12 noon, Tuesday Midday Madness, Alfonso Elder Student Union. Call 560-6494.

FEBRUARY 9 (Wednesday), 4:30 p.m., Bus leaves for basketball games in Richmond, Va., Alfonso Elder Student Union Parking Lot. Call 560-6363.

FEBRUARY 9 (Wednesday), 5:30 p.m., Women's Basketball, NCCU at Virginia Union, Richmond, Va. Call 560-6574.

FEBRUARY 9 (Wednesday), 7:30 p.m., Men's Basketball, NCCU at Virginia Union, Richmond, Va. Call 560-6574.

FEBRUARY 10 (Thursday), 10 a.m. - 4 p.m., Trivia Quiz, Alfonso Elder Student Union. (Pick up quiz sheets at room 125, Student Union.) Call 560-6494.

FEBRUARY 10 (Thursday), 7 p.m., Dramatic Production, "The Zoo U Man," sponsored by Alfonso Elder Student Union, B.N. Duke Auditorium. Admission free to students with valid NCCU identification. Call 560-6494.

FEBRUARY 11 (Friday), Last day to file for graduation at the end of the semester.

FEBRUARY 11 (Friday), 2 p.m., Faculty Senate meeting, Whiting Building. Call 560-6476.

FEBRUARY 11 (Friday), 7 p.m., Movie, "Malcolm X," Health Sciences Auditorium. Call 560-6534.

FEBRUARY 12 (Saturday), 9 a.m., Free University, L.T. Walker Complex. Call 560-6534.

FEBRUARY 12 (Saturday), 10 a.m., Quettes monthly meeting, 149 Miller-Morgan Building. Call 493-1084.

FEBRUARY 12 (Saturday), 2:30 p.m., Bus leaves for basketball games in Elizabeth City, Alfonso Elder Student Union Parking Lot. Call 560-6363.

FEBRUARY 12 (Saturday), 5:30 p.m., Women's Basketball, NCCU at Elizabeth City State, Elizabeth City. Call 560-6573.

FEBRUARY 12 (Saturday), 7:30 p.m., Men's Basketball, NCCU at Elizabeth City State, Elizabeth City. Call 560-6573.

FEBRUARY 12 (Saturday), 8 p.m., Lyceum Program, Festival of Spirituals, B.N. Duke Auditorium. Call 560-6557.

FEBRUARY 12 (Saturday), Valentine Dance sponsored by Alfonso Elder Student Union. Call 560-6494.

FEBRUARY 13 (Sunday), 3 p.m., Graduate Students' Association General Meeting.