

A diverse work in progress - Largely Latino area blends pockets of old, new, arts, business

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For some, Oak Cliff is the place to be - with its trees and rolling terrain, its energy and edge, its time-worn, unfabricated look and feel.

For others, it's simply a place to live and work, a home near family and friends or a 'hood with too much crime and neglect.

For all, the swelling of the Latino population keeps changing the dynamics west of the Trinity River.

A recent study of southern Dallas for The Dallas Morning News found the number of Latinos in a core section of Oak Cliff has increased 79 percent since 1990, while the number of non-Latinos there shrank by 68 percent.

Oak Cliff's Latino population is diverse, as are its Anglo and African-American residents. Its range of wealth and education, its burgeoning arts scene, gay and lesbian residents and mix of long-timers and newcomers all deepen the plot.

The day-to-day blending of people can be rich, routine or works in progress - with varying degrees of meshing or rub.

Across Oak Cliff, scenes and stories of this interplay abound.

Two worlds, one street

On Davis Street, at Cedar Hill and Llewellyn avenues, you'll see the hungry eating in cars or standing outside the Taqueria El Si Hay. You'll also find an urban crowd sipping wine and dining from an eclectic menu at Bolsa.

Nearby, you can eat Salvadoran food at the original Gloria's restaurant or buy Salvadoran food and clothing at Tienda Santa Rosa or rubber for the road at Honduras Tire Shop.

"It's as colorful as it comes. It's an interesting corner," says Royce Ring, a Bolsa owner, surveying the scene from the restaurant's streetside patio.

The place opened 14 months ago in a former automotive repair shop, bringing new energy and another taste of hipness west of the Bishop Arts District.

"We wanted to do something that was indigenous and felt like it belonged," he says.

"We call it Austinese," adds Chris Zielke, another Bolsa owner.

Ring says Tejano music often booms from passing cars on Davis, competing with the soft indie-rock flowing from Bolsa's patio speakers. He talks of roaming dogs and bicycle vendors and the El Si Hay stand across the street. Some of the best tacos in town, he says.

There, inside the little white stand with green and red awning and no tables, you often will find Gloria Gaytan taking orders at the window, while her brother or sister or cousins prepare the goodness.

"We all cook. It's all family," Gloria says of the 12-year-old business built on the expertise of her grandfather, a former cook at El Fenix.

They all cook, except for her father, Jose Gaytan, who owns the single-stand operation. He taste-tests the daily creations and in the evenings parks his elotes cart outside, from which he sells a mighty blend of fresh-roasted corn, butter, sour cream, cheese and hot sauce.

Gloria Gaytan says she's given Bolsa a try: "It's OK. I like it. It's a lighter food." Her father hasn't ventured over.

Neither has Yesenia Rubio, store manager of Tienda Santa Rosa.

Rubio says Bolsa has helped clean up and enliven the neighborhood. The area is "more presentable" and feels safer, she says, recalling how years ago, "when we closed, I was running to my car."

Her mother, El Salvador native Maria Rubio, opened the store in 1990 after working across the street at Gloria's, still owned by her sister, Gloria Fuentes.

Forty years ago, the building was home to a laundry. Now, inside an iron-barred door and windows and walls colored mustard and green, you can buy an array of products - from Salvadoran cheese and frozen fruit to shampoo and jewelry. Plus pastries baked at one of Mario Rubio's four area restaurants and pupusas crafted weekends at the store.

"At the other ones we have white people, but not here," Yesenia says of her mother's restaurants.

Next door, at the Honduras Tire Shop, owner Daniel Serrano and his two sons and a cousin serve mostly Latinos outside near the street.

Stacked tires and the smell of rubber fill rooms where a paint store operated 40 years ago.

"I do it for my customers," Serrano says of the bold yellow coloring of his shop's outer walls, a drawing card for a business he opened "25, 26, 27 years ago. I don't know." He says he came to Dallas from Mexico in 1974 and calls his operation "Honduras" because "I like the name."

All are part of the business fabric of here.

In its study, the Institute for Urban Policy Research at the University of Texas at Dallas, found that in the portion of Oak Cliff studied, businesses distributing food and drink were most common, making up 36.4 percent of the retail sales. The report also noted a 4 percent increase in employers from 2000 to 2006.

Last of the dinosaurs

The intersection of Clarendon Drive and Edgefield Avenue has been Clayton Sawyers' stomping ground or workplace since the mid-1950s.

His father, Ralph Sawyers, opened a car repair and body shop there in 1955. And today, the son is hanging in with the lone Anglo-owned business in that part of town.

"I'm the last of the dinosaurs," says the grinning owner of Texas Body Shop.

From his office chair, he talks of the 1950s and his days at Winnetka Elementary School across the street. The school then was mostly Anglo; now its enrollment is 98 percent Latino. He looks across the intersection and recalls Calvin's fruit stand, now a taqueria, and Neel's convenience store, now a washateria and snack shop.

He owns and occupies part of a brick building dating to 1923 and leases space to Pancho's Auto Repair. Juan's Automotive is another neighbor. Next to Juan's stands Clemente Arriola's auto repair shop.

"I send business to him, and he sends business to me," says Sawyers, turning somewhat serious after a bout of jokes and bull with Arriola outside his shop.

"It's the only way to survive," says Arriola, who opened the business in 1984 after moving to Dallas from Illinois.

Occasionally waving at a passing car, they talk about change, as streets and sidewalks boil with vendors and homebound parents.

"This building here is new," says Sawyers, pointing at the school. "Three homes were torn down there" to build a parking lot, adds Arriola. His children attended Winnetka; one of his grandchildren still does.

Back at his shop, a bumper awaits Sawyers' hand. But he wants to talk about his second career as Santa Claus and the gigs he has lined up so far this season. With a curly white beard, flowing white hair, ample belly, rosy cheeks and hearty laugh, he's ready for the role.

He says he uses Pancho's wrecker service and he and owner Francisco Mancilla "do fair" communicating with each other, even though he speaks "poquito Spanish - enough to be dangerous."

He says his walk-in customers are few because "Hispanics prefer to deal with their own."

He talks about how he moved from Oak Cliff to North Dallas and University Park and on to Cedar Creek Lake. He says his four daughters have no interest in an auto body shop.

And he says it's maybe time for another change. "I'm ready to sell the business and go be Santa Claus."

Common causes unite

Judy and Charlie Brooks moved to Oak Cliff five years, after buying her grandparents' house on Perryton Drive.

Across the street lies Kiest Park, where they can join Latinos, African-Americans and other Anglos on the paths and at the recreation

center.

"We're pretty diverse," Judy Brooks says of her neighborhood, one she recalls as mostly Anglo when she would visit as a child. "I'm glad we came."

She's not so glad about what she and some of her neighbors say have been persistent problems around Kiest Park. But a confronting of their concerns - about Latino street cruisers, illegal street vending and other issues - is building some unity on multi-ethnic Perryton.

Neighbors have complained to the city with some success: the addition of stop signs. They gathered recently for a neighborhood meeting with city officials at the Brooks home and plan to petition the city for parking restrictions.

The problems remain, Judy Brooks says. Vendors still park in front of houses, sometimes blocking sidewalks and feeding a littering of streets and the park. The cruising continues.

But the common cause is bringing the neighborhood together, she and others say.

"That was my first time to go to Judy's home," said Kristy Finley, an African-American homeowner on Perryton, recalling the recent meeting.

She and the others that evening walked along the street to observe the concerns. "I met a neighbor I had only waved at" - an elderly Anglo woman, Finley said.

"It was a great thing," she said. "She came out on her porch to tell us about some problems she had seen.

"Now I know who she is."

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Study in contrast

A portion of Oak Cliff was one of five Dallas neighborhoods studied in a report commissioned by The Dallas Morning News. These comparisons were included in the report:

Oak Cliff study area Dallas

Note: The study area is bounded by Jefferson Boulevard to the north, Marsalis Avenue to the east, Illinois Avenue to the south and Hampton Road to the west.

SOURCE: Institute for Urban Policy Research at the University of Texas at Dallas

% Housing units over 50 years old 67 25

% Single-family housing 76 43

% Hispanic residents 80 45

% Change in crime 2007-08 -14 -10

Crimes per 1,000 population in 2008 62 71

• Caption: PHOTO(S): (1-3. Photos by OSCAR DURAND/Staff Photographer)1. Street vendors, or paleteros, work in front of Winnetka Elementary at the corner of West Clarendon Drive and South Edgefield Avenue. Their crowds - and sometimes their litter - have drawn complaints in residential areas.2. Bolsa, a cafe at the corner of Davis and Llewellyn, has drawn an urban crowd into Oak Cliff for wine and dining. "It's an interesting corner," says Royce Ring, a Bolsa owner.3. Texas Body Shop owner Clayton Sawyers visits with Joe Garcia (center) and Carlos Delgadillo. He's the last Anglo proprietor in his corner of Oak Cliff by Winnetka Elementary. CHART(S): (1. MICHAEL HOGUE/Staff Artist) Latino transformation2. Study in contrast3. DigitalEXTRA MAP(S): (TOM SETZER/Staff Artist) In Oak Cliff

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