

How Have We Changed over the last 25 Years?

by Paul J. Hamel

Some things have changed for the better, some for the worse. Then, there are those things that never change. When asked how this community has changed over the last 25 years, I decided to find out by interviewing a dozen students, teachers, and residents. To get the pulse of the community and person-on-the-street point of view, residents from West Hollywood, Hollywood, Park La Brea, and the Beverly-Fairfax area were asked about how their lives have changed.

What I found out wasn't very surprising and seemed to confirm what I already knew. Our community has become more urban with more construction and more people. However, we have managed to keep the "tight knit little community" feeling, said Don Leach, a thirty-five year resident who lives on Flores Street.

Over the past decade, large and visible transformations have appeared in our midst: Santa Monica Boulevard, the Grove, the growth of Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, the Sunset Millennium, the rebirth of Pan Pacific Park, the renovation of Park La Brea, the new Palazzo Apartments, the Gateway, Hollywood & Highland, the Arclight, and now the Beverly Connection. We are slowly emerging as a mixed-use community where businesses occupy the street level and the residents inhabit the apartments, condos and lofts above. Single family homes are no longer being built and the remaining ones are being renovated, remodeled and enlarged. It would be difficult to go down any local residential street and not see a renovation project.

Less visible, but equally important changes have included the construction of flood control tunnels, replacing of water pipes, placing electrical and TV cables underground, the removal of telephone poles along Santa Monica Boulevard, the infrastructure changes at Park La Brea, improved waste management and recycling.

Geri Rhosen, a teacher in the "Conversation Cafe" class at Plummer Park in West Hollywood, remembers the time when West Hollywood was not as attractive as it is now. She remembers the narrow, broken sidewalks, and all the litter that collected along the railroad tracks running down the middle of Santa Monica Blvd. Today she can stroll down Santa Monica along tree-lined sidewalks. Raisa Chertok, a twenty-year resident from the former Soviet Union and now a US citizen, explained that the Arclight and surrounding renovations on Sunset have greatly improved her immediate community around Fountain and Vine.

Other recent "quality of life" improvements include a new Fairfax Library on Gardner Street, the Duran library on Sunset, a new community and senior center in Plummer Park, a pocket-park on Kings Road, a soon-to-be completed West Wilshire Center Senior Center on Gardner Street and the community center at Pan Pacific Park.

Homelessness

Other than the obvious physical changes around us, the single most mentioned social issue was homelessness. Most agree that the homeless issue hasn't changed much. "Like other areas of Los Angeles, homelessness has not been addressed," states Don Leach. Phil and Carrie Gleason, residents on Kings Road in West Hollywood, are more concerned about the "aggressive" homeless, who seem to be increasing in number recently. Although the Gleasons feel generally safe in the area, they avoid walking outside at night.

Don Leach believes, that although Hollywood is undergoing a renaissance, it has not removed the "sleaze factor on Hollywood Boulevard." Leach added that "the ugly security bars and grates in front of the stores on Hollywood Boulevard are still there." "It makes the area look like a storage area late at night," Leach pointed out.

Affordability

Affordability of real estate and rentals is another major issue; most agree that home and apartment prices prevent young residents from staying in the area and young families from relocating here. It only further reduces the number of seniors in the area. Most long-term property owners in the area can no longer purchase the home in which they live due to the three fold increase in value over the last few years, Phil Gleason explained. Who, thirty years ago, could ever imagine million-dollar homes along Sweetzer, Havenhurst, or La Jolla Streets? Wil Kinsley, a thirty-year resident on Norton Street, believes that the area will eventually become "East Beverly Hills." Kinsley believes that long-term residents are gradually being squeezed out by a younger, more moneyed professional generation. "People are buying for investment, not to live here," continued Kinsley, and adds that this is such a great place to live that even straight people want to live here. He jokes, "Lovely city! But, where's the affordable housing?" Rae Mitchell, a local resident of 31 years, also agrees that more professionals and Gays are moving in. Ms Mitchell is noticing more license plates with doctor's symbols in her building's parking garage.

Traffic

A third major issue that has worsened over the years is traffic. The density of the area didn't seem to bother those questioned, but not being able to get around quickly and comfortably is a growing concern. Wil Kinsley asked, "Where's the subway?" Thanks to methane gas and the explosion at Ross's Department store in the 1980s, a subway in the area has been a dead issue. Only recently, with the support of Congressman Henry Waxman, a proposed subway is now being talked about again.

Phil and Carrie Gleason don't worry about the traffic; they like taking the bus and walking. Phil takes a bus to downtown Los Angeles every day and enjoys it. He says it's convenient. Carrie takes a bus from West Hollywood City Hall to Fairfax and then walks to her favorite weekly activity, Saturday afternoon ballroom dancing at the Fairfax Senior Citizens Center on Melrose. Sofia Gelman, a retired doctor, likes the new buses because there are no stairs.

Social Services

Social services, especially for senior citizens, have steadily increased over the past 25 years. Sofia Gelman points out that the local government is closer to the people, listens, and provides the needed senior citizen services. She added that these services also touch the youth by providing them with a teen center where local boys and girls can play in supervised activities, in which they learn how to interact with each other and with seniors. Gelman said that this has improved the behavior of many children, especially in showing respect for others.

New Technology

Surprisingly, all but two of the residents questioned had a cell phone. None have recently used a public phone. Most begrudgingly have a cell phone out of necessity, especially during an emergency.

Computers have not only become popular with the youth, but also with the older generations. Except for two persons, everyone questioned had a computer and knew how to use it. One only has to visit a morning computer class for senior citizens at Plummer Park or Park La Brea to realize that no matter what the age, we can still learn to use new technology.

“The Internet has made it easier to meet people,” says Wil Kinsley. Kinsley, who took a computer class at Plummer Park, was shocked to pay only a few dollars for the Westside Community Adult School class.

The Russian Community

Sofia Gelman, a Russian-speaking, retired doctor, and member of the West Hollywood Senior Advisory Board, predicts that the Russian-speaking community will no longer exist in another twenty years. Gelman also suggest that future Russian immigrants may not be Jewish. Raisa Chertok of Hollywood, explains that the elderly Russian Jews are dying off and their children are moving to outlying areas. Jolie Bechet, an English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) teacher at Plummer Park, confirms that there is a change in the make up of adult education students at Plummer Park. New English language learners only include a hand full of Russian-speakers and fewer Spanish-speakers as well. New students make up a diverse mixture of French, Italian, Eastern Europeans, Israelis, Koreans, Armenians, Japanese, Brazilians, and even Yemenis. The group is younger and more professional and even includes some “foreign wives” of American men. In the ESL, computer and art classes at Park La Brea there has also been an increase in the number of Korean students. Ron Studebaker, a 30-year resident of the area, says that now the community is more “integrated” with various groups coming together.

Three Communities in One

Most residents seem to agree that there are really three different communities in one: the residents, those who work here, and the “evening” crowd. The residents still walk in the neighborhood, chat with their neighbors when walking their dogs, and are diverse in life styles. The second group includes those who work here.” “They look at West Hollywood with envy because they don’t live here, says Wil Kinsley. The “evening” group brings money (through taxes) to pay for city services. These evening guests have provided the residents with an extraordinary level of social services, which is the envy of other municipalities. Shirley Franta, a photographer who take photos in bars and restaurants, says that “the evening crowd doesn’t dress up any more and doesn’t spend money like it used to.” Kinsley sees a change in how the evening crowd has fun. “Back then, it was drinking to socialize, then it turned to tweaking, and now to awareness,” he said. He believes that the crystal meth problem has greatly impacted the community.

The Gay Community

The Gay community has flourished over the last 30 years. As in many other cities the “Gay” area was usually found in the “industrial” part of the city, today Gay businesses are at the center of the city and community life. There’s even a Gay church, the Metropolitan Community Church and a Jewish temple, Ben Ami.

Ron Price, a former Marine and 45-year resident, feels that he lives a better life today. He says that he doesn’t think of himself as only “Gay,” but as a “human being,” just the same as everyone else.

“Cityhood made the Gay community progressive and meaningful,” he added. “Yesterday’s fantasy became today’s facts. We learned that everything is possible.”

Park La Brea

Joy Simmons, a graduate of Los Angeles High School and a 30-year resident on Block 10 of Park La Brea, explained that Park La Brea is always changing. Its latest transformation includes a new generation of residents, especially young families with children. “Just look at the number of strollers that are around now,” says Ms. Simmons. She explained that after World War II, Park La Brea was a housing project for veterans. It was so popular that most of the residents stayed and aged, thus explaining why Park La Brea was widely considered a “senior community” in the 70s and 80s. She also notes that there is more of an ethnic mix with more Korean families moving in. “I just look at the new laundry room instructions, which are written in Korean, to see who is moving in,” said Ms. Simmons. Still, with all this change, she considers Park La Brea to be a great place to live. “People are friendly, feel safe, and know their neighbors.” Ms. Simmons also pointed out that the place looks like a community—“a town within a town.” In closing, she said that Park La Brea still has that “village allure” that brought so many of the residents here in the first place.

So, have we changed? Of course we have. How could we not? Isn’t change the only constant in the universe? “Maybe some things just don’t change or shouldn’t change,” says Don Leach. Other issues that seem not to have changed much are the level of crime, tolerance, and diversity. Some of the best unchanged places are Canter’s Restaurant, Pink’s Hot Dogs, and Irv’s Burgers. Phil Gleason sums it all up by saying that the best thing that hasn’t changed is our great weather.