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Bright lights and blight

Deputy's slaying cast new focus on a city struggling to forge a positive image

By Jenny Marder
Staff writer

HAWAIIAN GARDENS — At first glance, Hawaiian Gardens isn't much to look at. Crumbling buildings and tired storefronts line the streets, countless roads lead to dead ends. Shopping carts, beach balls and breeding mosquitoes have staked their claim in a drainage ditch that cuts through town.

Contrary to its namesake, Hawaiian Gardens has little resemblance to Hawaii and more asphalt than it does gardens. (It was named after a fruit stand in the 1950s.)

With 15,000 people inhabiting less than a square-mile area, the densely packed city has long struggled economically.

Still, though not immediately apparent, it has made major financial strides in the past decade, mostly due to the arrival of the Hawaiian Gardens Casino, which opened in 1995.

"It's been the comeback kid kind of city that's recovered from oblivion," said Mayor Leonard Chaidez.

Residents were devastated by the slaying of Deputy Jerry Ortiz, who was fatally shot Friday as he went to a residence in the 12000 block of 223rd St., to follow up on an attempted murder investigation in which Jose Luis Orozco was suspected. Deputies arrested Orozco later that day, alleging that he killed Ortiz.

Some say that with the shooting, the city's reputation also suffered yet another setback.

The attack has brought attention to the city's gangs, rather than its more successful residents.

Within city borders are 500 documented gang members, according to Lakewood Sheriff's Lt. Ralph Ornelas. In 2004, police reported two gang-related murders and 25 deadly weapon assaults, he said. So far this year, there have been three gang-related murders and 14 gang-related



Jeff Gritchen / Press-Telegram

Signage in Hawaiian Gardens has decidedly low luster in much of the city.

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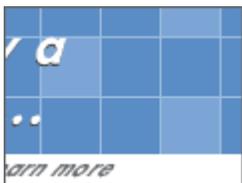
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assaults.

"You can't be everywhere," Chaidez said. "But we're always looking at the public safety budget."

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Gang prevention is a priority for council, he said.

He pointed to two recent programs: an anti-gang camp that the city paid \$9,000 for students to attend and a weekend workshop for 35 Hawaiian Gardens junior high and high school students, identified as high-risk for gangs. Workshop leaders educated students on subjects like conflict-resolution, consequences of violence, integrity, anger management and confidence.

"I feel this city has had a bum rap for years. We've had a hard time with P.R. because of the casino ... The people here are good people; they're real people. But they got dealt a bad hand because of the density."

Chaidez has vivid dreams for his hometown. He wants to cover the drainage ditch, which is floating with soda cans, plastic bags and other trash. He wants to open the city's many dead-end streets to facilitate circulation for police cars and firetrucks. He wants his residents to have a real park, where they can barbecue, throw Frisbees and enjoy the somewhat-tropical weather.

About 70 percent of the city's revenue comes from the casino, which cuts about 12 percent of its gross profit to the city. Last month, Chaidez said, the city received a check for \$835,000.

That money has been directed toward improving city services and bringing the budget into the black.

A \$4 million budget in 1999 has grown to a balanced \$22 million budget, with a \$4.5 million reserve fund, approved by City Council on June 14. In that time, the number of deputies patrolling the streets has doubled, and the recreation staff has tripled. The city has increased its public safety budget by 56 percent.

"The money we get from the casino has allowed our city to provide programs needed to enhance the quality of life here," Chaidez said.

The casino replaced a popular market, Plowboys, which shut down in 1995, when the Hawaiian Gardens Redevelopment Agency bought the six-acre site and sold it to developer Irving Moskowitz, owner of the state's largest bingo operations.

Upon the market's closing, customers mourned the loss of the crowded, colorful stands, sawdust-sprinkled cement floors and deli counter with freshly butchered slabs of pork and beef.

Hawaiian Gardens is one of the smallest cities in Los Angeles. Census figures indicate that 62 percent of families speak Spanish at home. The median family income is \$31,840 and the unemployment rate, as of November 2004, was 6.9 percent. Youth ages 15 to 24 make up 18 percent of the population. There are two elementary schools and one junior high school within the city's borders.

While youth and senior programs used to be nearly nonexistent, the city recently opened a new teen center and has a thriving senior center that offers free lunches to its seniors.

"We've been diligently trying to build the city up and improve life for people in the city," said City Councilman John Heckerman. Other current projects include improving building facades on Norwalk Boulevard and repaving and resurfacing streets.

Henry Centeno, who has lived in Hawaiian Gardens all his life, said conditions have improved markedly in the last few years.

"This is a small city with a small problem," he said. "But the problem is (overshadowing) the city with this shooting."

Another resident, who didn't want to be identified, said Hawaiian Gardens has always had a bad and undeserved reputation.

"When I moved here, people said, 'Why are you moving to Shotgun City?'"

"They call it Hawaiian Garbage," added another resident.

Others say that there's another side to Hawaiian Gardens that is often overlooked, one in which people tend lovingly to their gardens and open their homes to their neighbors; where the warm smells of chicken and rice and tortillas waft out the windows of neighborhood streets.

"We're such a small town that we just feel the vibes of our neighbors," said City Councilwoman Betty Schultze. "It's almost like we can hear each other whisper from one side of the street to the other."

The city's charm, she said, lies in its close-knit bedroom community, where people honk and wave as they drive down the street and bump into friends at Food For Less.

"There's a rhythm here," Schultze said. "That's why it hurts so much, this thing that went down this week."

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THE STATE

Gangs, Crime and Dreams Live Where Deputy Died

- The slaying focuses new attention on Hawaiian Gardens, a small city with big problems.

By Megan Garvey and Natasha Lee, Times Staff Writers

The name conjures up images of resort living, lush tropics, the beach — unless you know its thin genesis was a thatched bamboo refreshment shack run by a man some say was a Prohibition-era bootlegger.

"You hear the name 'Hawaiian Gardens' and you think of someplace nice and then when you get here you're like: 'Oh, OK,'" said Unaloto Makanesi, 18, whose family moved to the tiny city two years ago, drawn here because they could afford to buy a house.

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The killing of Jerry Ortiz, 35, a 15-year veteran of the L.A. County Sheriff's Department working on gang suppression, underscored the city's reputation for crime and danger. After a massive door-to-door search, Jose Luis Orozco, a 27-year-old reputed gang member with devil horns tattooed on his head, was arrested in a Hawaiian Gardens home the next day.

Hawaiian Gardens is one of the smallest cities in California — measuring less than one square mile — but it is beset by big problems. The massive loss of manufacturing jobs by the early 1990s in southeast

Makanesi, like others in the community where a sheriff's deputy was fatally shot Friday, is well aware of what many outsiders think of her hometown.

The closest thing it has to an ocean view is the concrete flood control channel called Coyote Creek. The strip malls look tired and many stores are vacant. Storeowners cite numerous robberies. On Makanesi's block, some houses are neatly kept, others have peeling paint and rusted swing sets on the front lawns.

The main — perhaps only — tourist attraction in the town of about 15,000 is a massive 8-year-old casino complex sold to citizens as the way to realize the paradise promised by the name.

Photos



Perilous street
(Luis Sinco / 1

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June 28, 2005

California
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Los Angeles County cut deep in the working-class, predominantly Latino community.

Sheriff's officials said street gangs are a major force in the city. Census figures indicate that a third of adults over 25 did not finish ninth grade and that 22% more did not receive high school diplomas. Nearly 40% of households reported an annual income of less than \$25,000.

The shooting has residents rising to defend their city.

"It's not as bad as everyone thinks it is," said Makenesi, echoing the sentiment of elected officials and loyal residents, some of whose families have lived there for generations.

In recent years, the city has been best known for its casino and the man behind the operation. Irving I. Moskowitz, a retired obstetrician who now lives in Miami Beach, has dominated city affairs from afar with a casino that provides about three-quarters of the city budget.

Moskowitz has attracted international scrutiny because of how and where he uses the millions of dollars in revenue the casino generates. A longtime backer of right-wing Jewish groups in Israel, he generously funds causes that include buying land in Arab neighborhoods of Jerusalem and turning it over for Jewish settlement.

But Hawaiian Gardens has long been beset by trouble closer to home.

A few blocks from Makenesi's house, Robert Anaya, 25, was at work Monday at his family's shop. His parents opened Durango Produce Market a few years after his birth. The rhythm of the neighborhood and the customers is familiar. Twenty years earlier, his family moved from Hawaiian Gardens to Cerritos after their home was burglarized, but they maintained the store and their ties to the neighborhood.

Lately, Anaya said, his unease has grown. In the last five years, he said, the shop has been robbed two or three times. Sometimes, customers leaving after cashing a check are chased for their money by people wielding screwdrivers. Across the street, he can see a shuttered store, one of many vacant retail buildings nearby.

"I think its getting worse. It's getting pretty dangerous. That's why I don't stand outside anymore, honestly," he said.

Only a few areas patrolled by the Sheriff's Department have more serious and violent crime per capita than Hawaiian Gardens. After rising sharply in 2004, serious crime appears to be down slightly so far this year, department statistics indicate.

But Capt. David Fender, commanding officer of the Lakewood sheriff's station responsible for patrolling Hawaiian Gardens, said the city's gang members are entrenched. Despite anti-gang efforts funded by casino revenues, Fender said, change has been hard to tackle.

"We have kids — youngsters — there whose parents were gang members we arrested," he said. "We have any number of problems, and these gang members' parents aren't holding their kids accountable."

Fender said Hawaiian Gardens' multigenerational gangs can make patrolling the streets perilous for deputies. Ortiz was working alone when he was killed.

Outside the apartment complex where he was shot, residents and friends created a makeshift memorial

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of balloons, candles, a Virgin Mary statue and bouquets of red roses and white and pink carnations.

Lorraine Garcia, 46, lives in a two-bedroom apartment above the residence where the shooting occurred. For 12 years she has worked as a crossing guard for Hawaiian Elementary School. The mother of four grew up here. She knows all her neighbors and most of the deputies who cruise the streets.

"I like it. I've lived here all my life, and I would have moved out a long time ago if I didn't," she said.

Mayor Leonard Chaidez said Ortiz's killing came at a time he otherwise described as an upswing for the community, where he has lived since 1971. Since 1999, Chaidez said, the city has increased its public safety budget by 56%.

"The crime is not as bad as it appears to be," said Chaidez, who attributed the crime rate largely to a small number of people. "We've done a lot of good things."

The mayor ticked off a list of improvements planned or in progress, including an increase in the housing rehabilitation budget, a free lunch program for senior citizens and street improvement projects aimed at creating better access for emergency vehicles.

For historian D.J. Waldie, who has studied L.A. suburbs, Hawaiian Gardens is an anomaly: a city with a significant number of low-income residents nestled next to more prosperous areas, including Cerritos and East Long Beach. Despite its struggles to replace well-paying blue-collar jobs that disappeared over the last generation, Waldie said, Hawaiian Gardens was "obviously a community that has lots of strengths."

"The name reflects the aspirations of working-class homeowners of an earlier era," Waldie said, "their desire for a comfortable life and a home in a community that was modern and forward-thinking."

Some lifelong residents, however, now say they believe they have to look elsewhere for that ideal. For Henry Centeno, 24, guidance has come from a local organization, Way Out Ministries, that has kept him focused on making a better life.

Centeno plans to save money from his banking job in Wilmington and move to another town, where the streets aren't cluttered with trash and cars aren't parked on lawns.

"There's two types of roads you can take when you live here," he said. "There's the gangsta road and the 'trying to get out of the ghetto road.' A lot of good people live here, but there's those bad influences that make a big influence on the city."

*

Times staff writer Richard Winton contributed to this report.

