

Sunday, Feb. 04, 2007

CEO shares vision for troubled E. Palo Alto

Mercury News Editorial

Emmett Carson believes in spending money where it can make a tangible difference. The new CEO of Silicon Valley Community Foundation had planned to redirect how the foundation funds non-profits, including those in East Palo Alto -- a task made urgent by the surge in violence in the city since mid-December.

By focusing on East Palo Alto now, he can galvanize the community and his donors to help head off more bloodshed. The foundation can play a critical role; Carson's determination and commitment, especially as the new guy in town, are important.

Five teenagers have died, one in a police shooting, and another was critically injured by gunfire in the city of just 33,000 over the past six weeks. Nearly two dozen people have been shot. A 13-year-old was caught carrying a loaded handgun into his middle school.

The violence has been a blow to civic self-confidence. Community leaders hoped they had put behind them the small city's reputation for murder and mayhem that once made national headlines. The recent shootings have left residents confused, frustrated and frightened.

They also have stiffened resolve.

On Saturday, residents of East Palo Alto walked for peace in a rally organized by One East Palo Alto. Silicon Valley Community Foundation donated \$10,000 to underwrite the rally, and the police department added \$1,500. Carson was one of the marchers.

Some marches are merely symbolic, but this one, together with a youth summit next month, could unify the community and make a difference.

The violence has infected East Palo Alto's diverse populations of African-Americans, Hispanics and Pacific Islanders. The incidents resulted from insults and turf wars. So far, they have not crossed racial lines.

The common threads are the ages of the dead, all young, and what killed them: guns.

Was it a spate of unrelated events? Maybe.

A trend? Not necessarily.

Evidence of the tenacious power of drugs and gangs? Probably.

Proof that the police and the non-profit community service agencies aren't yet reaching those who desperately need alternatives to unstable lives? Definitely.

The Mercury News

The Newspaper of Silicon Valley
MercuryNews.com

``There are lots of disconnected people who are beyond the reach of our normal client base," acknowledged Faye McNair-Knox, the executive director of One East Palo Alto Neighborhood Improvement Initiative.

Although parts of the city are becoming prosperous, East Palo Alto remains a first and temporary stop for many immigrants. Violence is cyclic, and poverty persists because families tend to move out as they become financially stable. This feeds the perception that problems are insoluble.

East Palo Alto has nearly 100 non-profit agencies working to help dropouts, the elderly, the young, the sick, the unemployed, the poor. That's impressive for a city of its small size. Among them: Collective Roots, Foundations for a College Education, Built to Last, YCS Summer of Service, Start Up, Comite Latino, College Track.

At a reception for Carson last week, the warm words, applause and embraces with which civic leaders introduced each other spoke to tight connections and partnerships.

Many non-profit leaders believe they are making a difference. Voters expressed confidence in them last November by passing Measure C, a \$100 parcel tax that will split \$1.3 million ayear between the police and non-profits. They showed an astute understanding that police alone can't solve the city's problems.

But past philanthropic initiatives have produced mixed results, in part because they have been scatter-shot. East Palo Alto non-profits received \$13 million over the past three years from the community foundation, but the average grant was only about \$10,000.

Carson was blunt at the reception: Despite non-profits' hard work and energy, too many small grants were given to too many organizations. The investment did not make a long-term difference.

``Some of you," he said, ``will not be getting grants, but I hope that you will continue to work with those who do."

``My job," he said, ``is to make the community better, not the non-profits stronger."

Carson intends to work with the community on a strategy that the foundation can take to donors in hopes of finding more dollars. The aims would be to reduce violence and to create jobs, tutoring and positive alternatives to guns and drugs. He wants the plan in place by summer, when kids get out of school.

Because East Palo Alto is under stress, he told us, this is a unique moment.

The first step is to get people's attention. If nothing else, the violence has done that.

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