

West Side has community pride, strong values—John Florez

If you were born or raised in Salt Lake City's west side, you can't get away from it. And you are proud to say that. It's part of your DNA—even if you've moved. It affects your soul and how you relate to people.

So how come some people keep talking about saving the west side? Save it from what? And to those who like to talk of the east side-west side divide, it's not a divide. It's a healthy rivalry about neighborhood. It's called pride. It's called community.

Those of us born and raised on the west side learned how to play and work together with kids and adults from all kinds of ethnic, religious, and class backgrounds. Houses were so closed together that, as kids, we had our own communications system—two cans strung together and thrown out the window. Though there were adults who only spoke their native language, somehow communication was no big deal.

On 600 west and 500 south, we lived next to a Greek family. During the summer, very early in the morning, I would see my mother talking to the Greek Mother, one in Spanish and the other in Greek. They were able to communicate because they had what it took to understand one another: respect and an appreciation. It's part of being from the west side. And it sticks with you forever.

The sense of pride and community still exists. You can see it in the faces of those who raised families there. You can see it in their well-kept yards and on the smiles of the owners. The west side character was molded from old-time pioneer and immigrant values, molded from hard-working people who built this city—the railroads, roads, buildings, mines, and smelters—the ones who made the city work each day and night and in the time of disasters.

The west side was built by people who lived by the rules and expected everyone to do the same. When you made an agreement with your neighbors, a handshake was all you needed. If your neighbors needed help, they didn't have to ask. People just showed up. If their kids got in trouble at school, it was double trouble at home.

Today, many people still live in the first home they bought, where they raised their families. They are examples of strong people with strong values. They are honest and speak without mincing words. What you see is what you get. It's how they raised their families. The west side has always had the welcome mat out for newcomers, no matter their ethnic, religious, or economic status. Today, you still find many second- and third-generation immigrants living there. New ones continue to come to seek a better life as our ancestors did. For west-siders, people are more important than things. They are willing to share with those in need.

What is needed on the west side is a west side historical preservation society that stops the destruction of all the great hangouts we used to have, such as Jimmy's market. It was at the crossroads of the west—700 south and 800 west. On one corner you had Riverside Elementary, my first school, with Chapman Library on the other corner. Jimmy had the best jawbreakers and the world's largest assortment of penny candy.

The Riverside playground was where white, black, Mexican, Greek and Italian kids played together and “occasionally” fought, though 10 minutes later it was over. We had no hall monitors, playground duty guards, crisis teams or anger-management sessions. We just worked it out, without adults trying to save us. That was our saving grace we learned how to stand up for ourselves without “self-esteem” classes.

We had the Arcade Theater, small neighborhood stores that sold groceries on credit with no computers to keep track. We had people with handcarts and baskets coming into the neighborhoods and selling vegetables, ice, cheese, milk, and a whole bunch of other handmade things.

Like many others, the entrepreneurs were immigrants. They are still there, only now they sell tacos, tamales, and enchiladas. There might even be a few Maurice Warshaws among them. (Remember Grand Central stores?)

West-side people are tough and independent; but because they are not complainers, politicians tend to ignore them. Because they are loyal, trusting, patient, and accepting, politicians have often interpreted that as a sign of weakness and have not kept promises. As a consequence, community improvements are lacking. Many are reluctant to run for public office because “they are too honest”

My advice to those who want to “help” the west side is to spend time there and listen to the people. While there are problems, you will quickly find that you are in a world where people still have time for what you may consider “small talk,” but it is really the essence of life. It’s about people.

We should stop trying to change the west side.

They never lost what many now yearn to have.