

## Long-struggling Vickery Meadow showing promise

Densely populated immigrant area getting aid with poverty, crime

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By MICHAEL E. YOUNG / The Dallas Morning News

Built as an Eden for swinging singles, Vickery Meadow soon slipped to a Paradise Lost, beset by crime and poverty.

Struggling to help a flood of immigrants that made it the most densely populated neighborhood in Dallas, churches and service agencies battled the worst of the social problems, and now Vickery Meadow is a place on the mend.

"We have such a neat neighborhood here," said Judy Jacks, executive director of the Vickery Meadow Learning Center, "but no one knows about us. We feel very neglected."

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SMILEY N. POOL/DMN  
Vickery Meadow in Dallas is a high-density neighborhood, as seen in a north-to-south aerial view. It's filled with apartments and condos and is home to many immigrants.

For years, there was good reason. Through the '90s, Vickery Meadow became home to thousands of children. But it had just one school, now called Jill Stone Elementary, with an enrollment of 352.

Every afternoon, kids spilled from dozens of school buses and scattered down Fair Oaks Avenue and the side streets of Vickery Meadow and into the warren of apartments and condominiums that fill this neighborhood wall-to-wall.

But a second school opened last August, and three more will follow this summer. And the children, an unimagined presence when Vickery Meadow was drawn, will finally have schools close to home.

Crime is down sharply. Apartment buildings have been spruced up. The light-rail station at Park Lane gives the hardworking residents a way to get to their jobs.

Perhaps most hopefully, development begins to nibble at the edges of Vickery Meadow, a place long seen as somewhere to avoid and now a neighborhood filled with promise.

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MEI-CHUN JAU/DMN  
Gregoria Perez carried her son, Ali, as they strolled outside the grounds Saturday at Northridge Court Apartments in the Vickery Meadow neighborhood. She and her husband, Vulfrano Hernandez, a construction worker, are immigrants from Mexico. They lived at another complex in the area but are happier where they live now.

Once intended as a stop for singles and couples on their way to permanent homes in the suburbs, Vickery Meadow is now filled with families, many content to stay there despite the constraint.

During its first decade, Vickery Meadow was much like its sprawling neighbor, The Village, attracting young, hip and reasonably well-off apartment dwellers.

But in 1988, the federal government amended the Fair Housing Act, making it illegal to refuse to rent to families with children. And a recession in the rental market sent prices plunging.

Within a few years, the young singles were gone, and a whole new population had arrived in Vickery Meadow. It's roughly bounded by Central Expressway to the west, the Skillman-Abrams corridor to the east, Northwest Highway to the south and Royal Lane to the north. It is one of Dallas' poorer neighborhoods – and among its most diverse.

At 5.3 square miles – much of it devoted to open parkland – its population tops 53,000. Its core area, defined as the Vickery Meadow Improvement District, is even more crowded, squeezing nearly 41,000 people, 11,000 younger than 18, into 2.86 square miles.

Many arrived from Central America, doubling the neighborhood's Hispanic population in the last decade. Others are refugees from sub-Saharan Africa and war-battered Bosnia.

Replacing one population with another, especially one in which many struggle at the edge of poverty with neither language nor job skills, created a whole raft of problems in Vickery Meadow and no infrastructure to deal with them.

Crime became the most notorious, and the reputation lingers despite strong efforts to get criminals off the streets.

"We have approximately 53,000 people living in what amounts to three square miles," Ms. Jacks said. "I defy you to put 53,000 people in three square miles and not have crime. But it's getting much better."

When calculated on a per-capita basis, Vickery Meadow's crime rate is lower than the rate for the city of Dallas, said Wayne Slaughter, executive director of the Vickery Meadow Improvement District and a retired Dallas police lieutenant.

"But it's the perceptions about crime we still need to deal with in Vickery Meadow," Mr. Slaughter said.

Anyone who passed through the neighborhood 10 years ago recalls prostitutes working the streets and drug dealers openly selling their goods.

"One man in our program who walked his child to the bus stop each day was appalled that hookers were out there and his child would have to see that," said Pam Riddle, assistant supervisor of the Dallas County Supervision and Corrections Department, which operates a neighborhood program for probationers from Vickery Meadow.

Prostitution remains a problem, if not nearly as open a problem as it once was, Mr. Slaughter said. And some in the neighborhood still sell drugs, but not so many, and not so openly.

Still, Ms. Riddle advises caution.

"I don't know of too many places where I'd be out on my own after dark," she said.

There were other problems, too, the lack of schools the most obvious.

The four new schools included in the Dallas Independent School District's \$1.37 billion bond election in 2002 will help meet the needs. But building them in an area jammed edge to edge with low-rise apartments and condos created a new problem.

"Something had to come down for the schools to go in," Mr. Slaughter said.

School officials ended up demolishing four apartment complexes to build the schools: Lee A. McShan Jr. Elementary, which opened in August with an enrollment of 737; and Jack Lowe Sr. Elementary, Sam Tasby Middle School and Emmitt Conrad High School, all set to open in August 2006.

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Each afternoon when the school buses stop outside the Melody Village apartments, 39 children rush down a hallway, past the swimming pool and into the complex's clubhouse – now the Vickery Family Wellness Center – where they'll do their homework, play, grab a snack, and once a week, attend a Bible study.

Run by Buckner Children and Family Services in cooperation with the owners of the complex, the wellness center provides computer training, English classes for adults and crisis counseling. But the after-school program for students 6-12 and an evening session for teens are the centerpiece.

"Maybe it's because we're here and we have this community center, but when families move here, they tend to stay," said Maria Pacheco, the site manager. "We have a lot of clusters of extended families here."

The center is licensed to care for 39 children in the after-school program, though many more need the service.

"We have some parents who barely see their kids because they're always working," she said. "Most have two jobs. So we have a long waiting list.

"But once kids are in the program, their families don't move. So the list never gets any shorter," she said.

And the kids in the after-school program love it.

One day shortly before Christmas, the kids took their places around the big round tables and quickly did their homework as they waited for their special guests. Soon, a group of students from Mesquite's Potteet High arrived with dozens of gingerbread houses waiting to be decorated and bags of candy and pretzels.

The students, from the Family, Career and Community Leaders of America club, have taken on the after-school program as their project for the year.

"We'll be doing lots of little activities here," said group president Kayla Kenney.

This one is a hit.

With their decorating supplies before them, they began work, quickly and carefully.

"What do you think of my roof?" asked Dulce Gonzalez, 11, as she spread a stream of frosting back and forth over the gingerbread.

Her friend Karla Valdez nodded, then went back to her fence.

Both girls have been part of the after-school program since they were old enough to attend.

"I started when I was 5," Karla said, "because they don't let you into the program before you're 5. But I've lived here like my whole life."

Dulce moved to Vickery Meadow from Mexico when she was 3 and speaks flawless English, but like most of the kids, she flips from Spanish and English with barely a thought.

"Most days when we come here, we do our homework, and they have people here to help us," she said. "And if we're done early, we go read a book or play a game. And on Tuesday, we have Bible studies."

And the best part about coming?

"We have snacks!" Dulce said.

"I like that they help us with our homework," Karla said.

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The children of Vickery Meadow have one big advantage over their parents: Most can speak English, and their career opportunities will be far greater because of it.

But Buckner's wellness center, churches and other agencies offer English classes for adults to give them access to better jobs.

The largest is the Vickery Meadow Learning Center, originally a mission of Preston Hollow Presbyterian Church and now standing on its own, though it remains the church's "flagship mission," Ms. Jacks said.

"We have about 550 adult students and 130 pre-K kids who come here for two hours at a time," she said.

"They come because they have a dream, and they know you don't just dream it and have it come true. You have to work at it."

Hermelinda Cazares' dream is to help her children toward a better life.

"I want to be a good helper for my children, a good teacher," she said. "Speaking English will help me at the meetings at school."

She spoke shyly. English is difficult, she said, but she's determined to master it.

"I have the courage to learn English," Ms. Cazares said. "And my oldest child – he's 10 – he says, 'You can do it!' "

Without the learning center, she wouldn't know what to do.

"All the time I say thank you to my God for the teachers here," Ms. Cazares said.

Like Ms. Cazares, the majority of students at the learning center are Hispanic, reflecting the makeup of the neighborhood, Ms. Jacks said. But she sees more and more Africans there, too.

"We have a rich tapestry – Ethiopians, Sudanese and some others, and our Spanish speakers," Ms. Jacks said. "The change was very rapid. Two, three years ago, we had nothing but Latinos, and that changed overnight. Now we're at least 15 percent African."

Students can remain in the language program as long as they like, she said, but the learning center does hold a graduation ceremony every spring at nearby North Park Presbyterian Church.

"We have student testimonials – they all want to speak, so we have to draw straws," Ms. Jacks said.

Language might be the greatest challenge facing Vickery Meadow's residents, but it's just one of many.

Few families have health insurance, so many residents turn to Presbyterian Hospital's emergency room for primary care.

With immigrants coming from various parts of the world – Bosnia, Africa, Central America – the agencies working in Vickery Meadow have had to scramble to find people able to teach and translate. And at least some of those immigrants are undocumented. No one knows how many, but most put the number in the thousands.

"The Hispanic population has doubled in this area in the last 10 to 12 years," Mr. Slaughter said. "It's a working population, but a lot of them work at low-paying jobs, and the undocumented workers are trying to work, too. But they're more limited."

Many take day labor jobs, he said, and carry their money with them because they don't have the documents they need to open bank accounts.

"Banking is a major issue for some of our people," Mr. Slaughter said. "So we're partnering with one bank now where maybe they can open a branch in the neighborhood and help people get their [identification cards from the proper consulate] so they can open accounts."

And with so many working parents in the neighborhood, many children spend their after-school hours largely unsupervised.

Diana Ford Jenkins, a five-year resident of Vickery Meadow, dropped by the learning center last week to volunteer. But her real hope is to help the area's children.

"We really need recreation centers here for the children, for pre-teens. And I see a need for a library," she said.

"I see all these kids and they have nothing to do."

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Development hovers at the edges of Vickery Meadow, bringing hope of jobs close to home for a population that largely uses public transit or walks to get where it needs to go.

The largest is Park Lane Place, a \$400 million mixed-use project at Park Lane and Central Expressway that adjoins Dallas Area Rapid Transit's light-rail station – a powerful draw for developers.

Park Lane Place includes a hotel, 700,000 square feet of retail space, offices and residences in more than a dozen buildings, including high rises.

Last month, Austin-based Whole Foods announced plans to anchor the development with a 70,000-square-foot flagship store, set to open in 2007.

Community leaders and city officials welcome the development.

City Council member Mitchell Rasansky sees Park Lane Place and a planned residential development in the Meadow Road-Manderville Lane area as promising signs in a neighborhood that's been down too long.

Given its location just down Northwest Highway from NorthPark Center, with DART's light rail line at its doorstep, Vickery Meadow seems a natural spot for redevelopment.

"When I look at Vickery Meadow today, I see nothing but positive things," Mr. Rasansky said.

"Compared with five years ago, it's night and day."

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