

**Palo
Alto**

Weekly

Serving Palo Alto, East Palo Alto, Menlo Park, Atherton and surrounding communities



East Palo Alto's Latino future

*A rapidly burgeoning Latino population
is changing the city in important ways.*

Page 18

EAST PALO ALTO has a Latino future

Story by Don Kazak Photographs by Renee Burgard

Ten years ago, the movie *El Norte* told a poignant story of two Guatemalans who journey to El Norte—the United States—in search of a better life.

Locally, there is an El Norte, and it is East Palo Alto.

There has been an increasing Latino population in East Palo Alto over the last 15 years, and a near explosion in the last five years or so, according to census and school district enrollment figures.

The city's name is two-thirds Hispanic. The population is heading in the same direction. At some point in the next decade, Latinos will become the majority population in the city.

The demographic shift is changing the city in important ways. The Ravenswood City School District has had to scramble to hire bilingual teachers and, last June, officially adopted a policy recognizing the multicultural nature of its enrollment.

Police Chief Burny Matthews has made hiring Latino officers a priority. As he put it, the department will be dead out on the streets if its officers can't speak the language. He now has five Latino officers, out of 35.

When Father Reni Cerecedo came three years ago to St. Francis of Assisi, a Roman Catholic Church with a Latino congregation, about 300 people attended mass on Sundays. Four times that number attend mass these Sundays.

For a city in such a crucible of change, with a new-found unity on the City Council, the racial transformation adds another factor to complicate what is already a very complicated situation.

East Palo Alto has seemingly turned the corner on the street violence of 1992 that left 42 people dead as homicide victims, largely as a result of the drug trade.

It is a city with no money to speak of. Officials now are trying to fast-track a major redevelopment project in the hope of garnering an increased tax base so the city can fund much-needed social services.

As East Palo Alto reaches for a new future, smoothing over past political bickering that had all but crippled the city government, there is a new issue.

For a city that is 33 percent Latino, according to the 1990 census, (school district enrollment is 52 percent Latino), the absence of Latinos in key community roles is conspicuous.

Only one Latino, Ruben Abrica, has served on the City Council in the past 10 years. Abrica is now on the school board. Another Latino, Nelson Santiago, is one of three candidates running Nov. 2 for the City

Council seat made vacant by the resignation of Nevada Butler.

Santiago may not have much of a chance, though, at least on ethnic grounds. There are more than 7,000 Latinos in the city, but only 500 of them are registered to vote, he said.

Gov. Pete Wilson's recent immigration proposal "is a wake-up call for Latinos to get organized," Santiago said. "The community needs everything. It doesn't have a bank. It doesn't have a shopping center. We're the fastest-growing population. By the year 1995, 1997 or 2000 the Latino population is going to be the largest population in East Palo Alto. There's no doubt in my mind about it."

Santiago's two opponents are black, as are the four City Council members. The politics of the city have been based in the African-American community for more than 20 years.

Why do so few Latinos in East Palo Alto vote? They may, in time, but a couple of factors are working against that.

One is that Mexican immigrants in California have one of the lowest rates of becoming United States citizens of any immigrant group, according to a 1988 study by the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials, a Los Angeles organization. The main reasons include no perceived benefit to citizenship, other than voting. There are other reasons.

"Part of it is the closeness to Mexico," said Luis Fraga, a Stanford University political science professor and the director of the Stanford Center for Chicano Research. "They maintain Mexican citizenship because it is relatively easy to go back."

In addition, the great majority of Mexican immigrants in East Palo Alto come from the Mexican state of Michoacan, west of Mexico City. More than that, they come from the very poor rural provinces of Aguililla and Apatzingan.

There, says Magdalena Fittoria, they were disenfranchised from the Mexican political system. Fittoria, a Ravenswood school district administrator, said that language barriers keep many Mexican immigrants from participating politically.

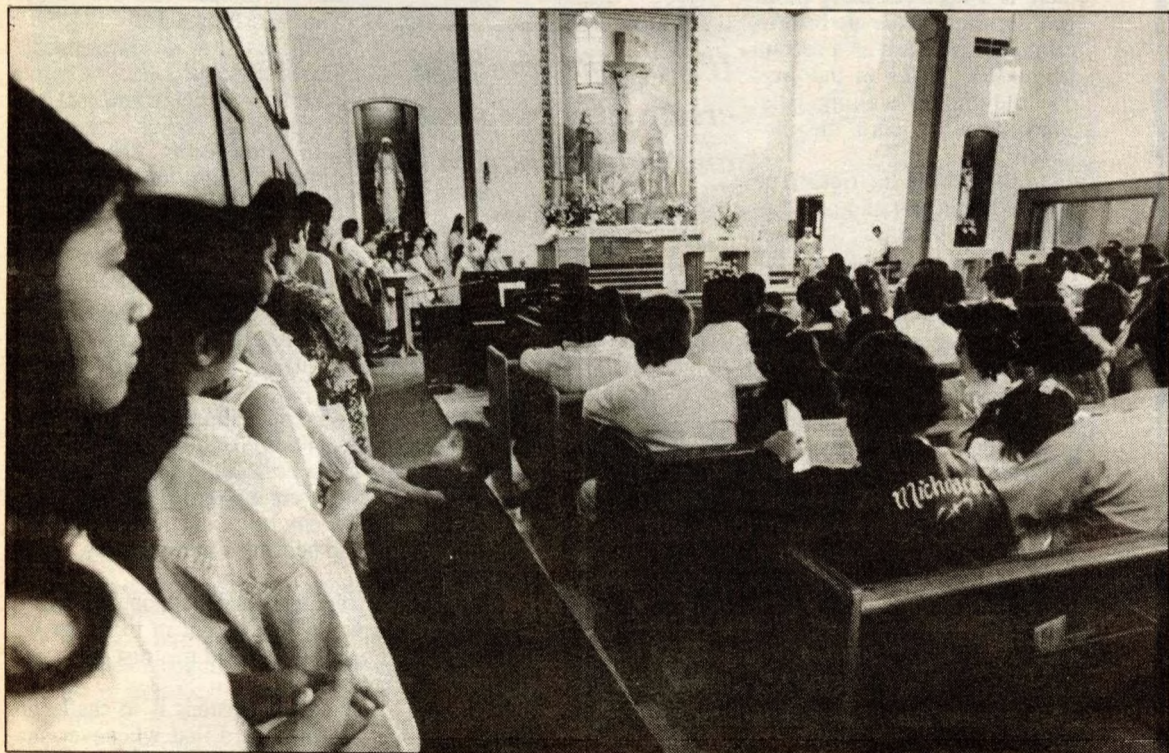
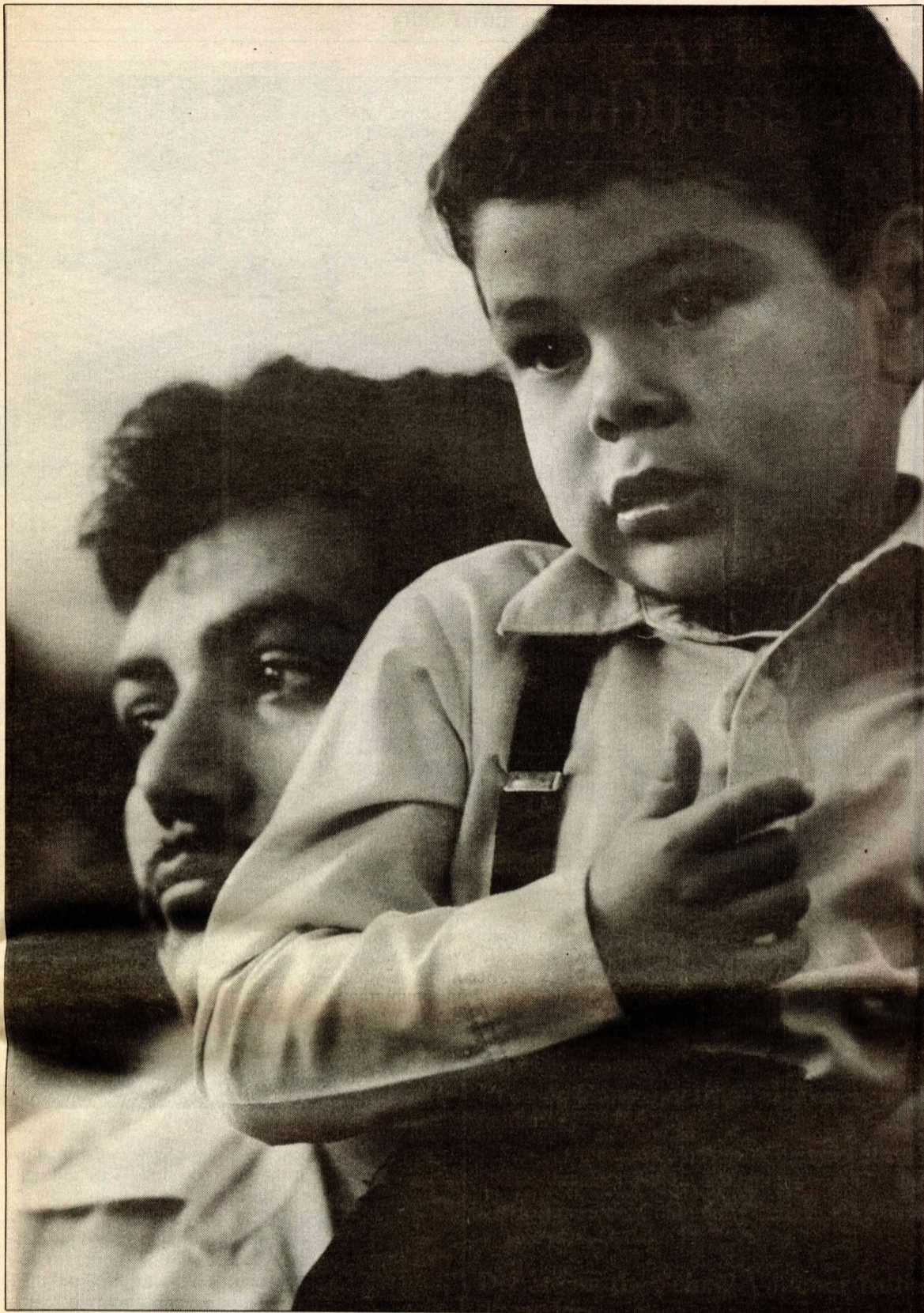
If they were disenfranchised politically in Mexico, they don't have many reference points to get involved to change things here.

The great increase in East Palo Alto's Latino population is traced by some to the federal amnesty act in 1988, which allowed undocumented residents to become legal residents. East Palo Alto attorney Dyanne Ladine said that as many as 300 to 500 Latinos in East



The crucifix at St. Francis of Assisi Church.

East Palo Alto's name is two-thirds Hispanic, and its population isn't that far behind



Palo Alto participated in the amnesty.

There is no indication of the number of undocumented residents in East Palo Alto, or whether the number is large enough to be viewed by anyone as a problem. "Nobody knows what the illegal population is," admitted Dave Ilchert, the regional director of the Immigration and Naturalization Service in San Francisco. At this point, no one is identifying that as an issue of concern in East Palo Alto.

Christina Galvez, who until recently worked with Latinos in East Palo at the social service agency Families in Transition, said the amnesty enabled many Latinos to bring their families here.

"We also saw the births of many children in young families," she said. "It has brought huge numbers of students to the schools."

Fittoria said that as recently as 1987, one-third of the Ravenswood district students were classified as LEP (limited English proficiency), the great majority of them Latino and the great majority of those Mexican. Today, 62 percent of Ravenswood students are LEP.

In the housing market, Santiago, who works as a mortgage banker, said most East Palo Alto apartment owners have been renting units to Latinos almost exclusively in recent years.

All of this is also resulting in some friction in the city. Some longtime residents resent the infusion of Latinos. Latinos say the city hasn't done much to accommodate them, and many of them feel they are treated poorly.

At a recent Planning Commission public hearing on rezoning a city property on Gloria Way for replacement housing for those who will be displaced by the Gateway 101 project, some black residents spoke in opposition because the occupants of the new units would be Latino.

There may be racial tensions from time to time, and a definite lack of integration at the civic leader level, but things could be worse.

Despite the city's recent history of drug-related violence largely involving black and Latino young men, very little of that was between racial groups, Galvez said. Instead, it was within racial groups.

"Among students, yes, there are tensions," said Fittoria. She said there are not a lot of fights that are racially tinged, though. "There's a lot of mouthing off, you know, just demeaning remarks."

East Palo Alto is the most ethnically diverse city on the Midpeninsula, and there is a potential for it to become a symbol of racial harmony.

Daniel Ramirez, the coordinator of a grants program at Stanford, has lived in East Palo Alto the last several years, and he sees the positive potential of the community. "It's a place where we can do it right," he said. "We can create a very inclusive community," especially because attitudes are not yet polarized between the Latino and black communities.

The potential roadblocks, he added, are the fears of the established African-American residents about Latino newcomers, and the fact that more recent immigrants from Mexico are being newly exposed to African-American culture.

This has its lighter side, too. Ramirez said young Latino children learning English sometimes come home with two versions: what they learn in the classroom, and the street talk they hear in the playgrounds from black classmates.

"We've lived in the same house these last 10 years," Fittoria said. "Next to us are a Hindu couple from Fiji. On the other side, there is a Mexican family. There is an African-American family across the street, with Samoans next door. There's also an elderly white couple across the street. Where else do you find that kind of neighborhood diversity?"

The city also has people from El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama, the Philippines and Tonga, along with a few Vietnamese.

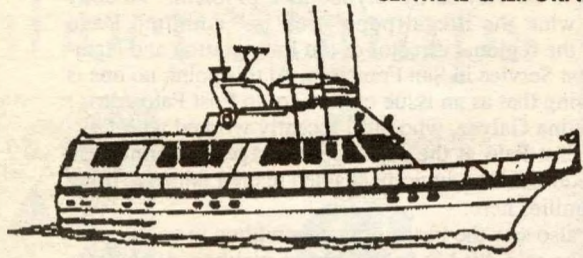
What draws people from Mexico and other places to East Palo Alto? Ruben Alevar, a lifelong resident and youth program counselor, said it is known that there is a large market for unskilled and semi-skilled laborers here, such as custodians and janitors, because of the proximity of several hospitals and Stanford University.

But the community hasn't adequately responded to the

(continued on next page)

Roberto Gonzalez holds Bernardo Godinez, top, at a recent mass at St. Francis of Assisi Church. The church, left, is overflowing in attendance these Sundays as a result of the influx of Latinos into East Palo Alto.

NEPTUNE SOCIETY OF CENTRAL CALIFORNIA



CREMATION

The simple and dignified way of dealing with death

We have two programs:

A Registration Program

A Frozen Price Program

Call or mail in this coupon today for FREE information

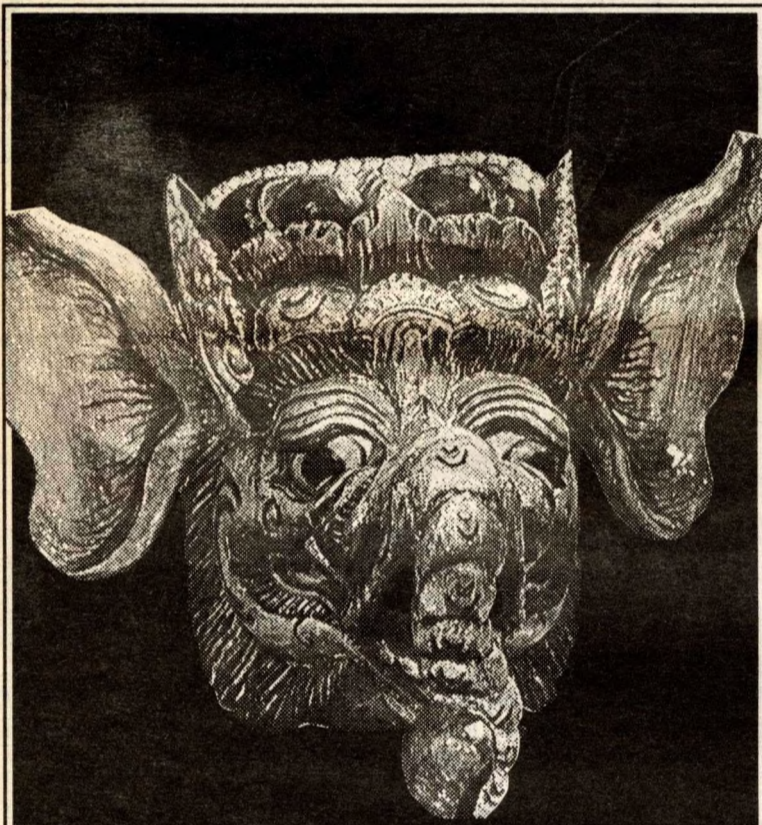
Name _____

Phone () _____

Address _____

City _____ Zip _____

798 South 2nd St., San Jose, CA 95112
(800) 225-1593 (408) 287-8700 PW



WHEN IT COMES
TO HELPING CUSTOMERS,
OUR STAFF IS ALL EARS.

The folks behind the counter can probably answer any questions you have about our many straight coffees and blends, so don't be afraid to ask: you may be led to a coffee experience you'll never forget.

Peet's Coffee + Tea

Berkeley, Oakland, Mill Valley, San Francisco, Menlo Park, Los Altos

VISA & MASTERCARD ORDERS: 800-999-2132



Cover Story



Latino future

(continued from previous page)

immigrants' presence in some ways. Speaking of the Latino community, Christina Galvez said, "Services are way behind needs, especially in language. There's a recognition (now) that there is a need for more bilingual services. There are insufficient ESL (English as a second language) classes in the city, and they're on waiting lists. They want to learn the language."

In the school district, "The change has been rapid and dramatic," Fittoria said. "Ravenswood without the Latino or LEP population has a very difficult agenda: inner-city youth with parents who have their own limited economic and education background. To have on top of that a population that does not speak the language has just been an added burden."

It's a burden for the people seeking services, too. "A lot of time I hear complaints from people that city services are insensitive to their needs," said Ruben Avelar. "They don't have people who speak Spanish, or if they do they're rude because they think of Latinos as, I don't know, less human or less qualified to be respected. That's why a lot of people are not stepping forward in the process, because of the experience they've had."

Besides police, the city has only 13 employees, said Russell Averhart, the acting city manager, and only one of those is Latino.

Some Latinos are also feeling some pent-up social anger. When times are tough, everyone points a

finger at undocumented workers with the familiar arguments that they use social services and take jobs away from citizens.

The governor stunned the Latino community with his sweeping proposal on new immigration policies. Immigration is an issue that has caught fire in California, but the people most likely to get burned by it are the Latinos already here, including citizens and even those who were born here.

"This is not all uncommon," Stanford's Fraga said. "There's heightened concern and backlash against immigrants during economic downturns. They are accused of taking jobs away from Americans and using too much social services."

Beyond that, there is the unease that comes when one ethnic group, long established in the

community, watches a new ethnic group take root and build numbers, changing the character of the community.

"I have a lot of respect for the history that African-Americans in this country have had to survive," Fittoria said. In East Palo Alto, "that population deserves a lot of credit for really pushing the sovereignty that the city has, even though there's a lot of work to do to become a more healthy, thriving community."

"But I also see the fears that that population has, because of the work they've put in to try to get ahead. There's a lot of fear and mistrust when another group comes in."

One way to face those tensions is to challenge the stereotypes. Fittoria said that whenever she hears a Latino stereotyping a black or the black community "I say something. I say 'you can't say

*It's an opportunity to
create a diverse society
and to learn how to in-
teract positively."*

—Magdalena Fittoria

Cover Story



Aurelia Castillo and her son, Johnny, on the porch of their Al-berni Street house, left, where bars have been placed over the windows to prevent break-ins. Nelson Santiago, above, a candi-date in the Nov. 2 City Council election, has raised the issue of Latino representation. Magdalena Fittoria, at right in photo be-low, visits a parent-child interaction program she coordinates in the Ravenswood City School District. She is holding her daugh-ter Jessica while her son Michael watches, as Socorro Arreguin is nearby with her children Gabriel, Eduardo and Jasmin.



that, you can't make that conclusion." The school district, Fittoria added, has taken steps to increase multicultural awareness and respect. "There's a recognition that we shouldn't see immi-grants or non-English speaking children and their families as a problem but as an opportunity," she said. "It's an opportunity to create a diverse society and to learn how to interact positively."

One truth is that when people stand up in public and say things about the Latino community and its needs, it isn't always well-received. Nelson Santiago stood up a City Council meeting earlier this year on business issues and called the Latino community the most important in the city

(continued on next page)

O P E N I N G W E E K E N D

C&C
CORNISH & CAREY
REAL ESTATE
PRESENTS

O P E N I N G N I G H T
The Centennial Premiere

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 9, 1993

6:00 P.M.

COCKTAILS, DINNER,
DINNER SOLD OUT

ENTERTAINMENT AND AUCTION

\$125, \$250 AND \$500 PER PERSON

(INCLUDES DANCING THROUGH THE DECADES)

DANCING THROUGH
THE DECADES

9:00 P.M. UNTIL MIDNIGHT

THE STANFORD SHOPPING CENTER ARCADE

\$35 PER PERSON (\$40 AT THE DOOR)

BROUGHT TO YOU BY



NORDSTROM

MUSIC BY

BIG BANG BEAT! AND THE KINGS OF SWING

ENTERTAINMENT BY

USA PRODUCTIONS

HISTORICAL SETTING BY

THE MUSEUM OF AMERICAN HERITAGE

TICKETS AVAILABLE AT

DIDDAMS, EUREKABANK, SPIRALS, MOLLIE STONE'S MARKET,

WIEDEMAN'S, PRESIDENT TUXEDO, THE FISH MARKET,

VILLAGE CHEESE HOUSE, BUNGEY TRAVEL INC.

AND CENTENNIAL HEADQUARTERS AT 425 BRYANT STREET

FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE CENTENNIAL FUND

AN ENDOWMENT FOR PALO ALTO AREA NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

O P E N I N G D A Y

The Centennial Year

A CELEBRATION OF DIVERSITY

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 10, 1993

CLOCK TOWER PLAZA, STANFORD SHOPPING CENTER

FREE . . . BRING THE FAMILY

10:00 A.M. TO NOON

CHECK-IN: PACIFIC WALKING CLUB 5 AND 10K FUN WALKS

1:00 TO 6:00 P.M.

SHOWCASE OF NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

HANDS-ON CHILDREN'S ART PROJECTS

MUSIC BY

MELLOTONES

ALBERT T. & THE COOL BREEZE

BERT WILLIAMSON'S RHYTHM & BLUES BAND

FRED SIMPSON & THE VILLAGE HEARTBEAT DRUMMERS

AND MORE . . .

INFORMATION: PALO ALTO CENTENNIAL HEADQUARTERS 415 322 1994 OR

1 800 FAX PLEASE AND ASK FOR DOCUMENT #19940

Cover Story

Latino future

(continued from previous page)

economically, and one could almost feel the tension in the room rise as four black City Council members listened to him.

"I don't know whether the tensions are just based on race," Mayor Sharifa Wilson told the Weekly at the time, "but there definitely are some tensions in the community. It may be more of an issue of old-timers versus newcomers, that kind of thing, where people see their block is changing ethnically."

Wilson also responded to the statement that there is no Latino representation on the City Council. "The Latino community needs to develop some leadership and become involved in the system,"

she said.

Santiago couldn't agree more.

"I believe we have a challenge right now," he said. "And that's to communicate with (Latinos) who aren't necessarily communicating with us. It's not that they don't have feelings. It's not that they don't have something to say or something to contribute. They actually have a whole lot to contribute. The concern I have is, why aren't they contributing?"

Santiago said he also believes Latinos have blamed their situation on others for too long. "We can no longer put ourselves in a position of victims and say, 'Oh, by the way, we are not getting a chance.' Let's take this whole thing out of the realm of racial tension. This is more than likely an issue of people who have political power and who can formulate

an agenda, and we can't. Let's face it, we need to organize, and this is one of the first efforts we're putting forth."

For Latinos, it may not even matter whether Santiago wins or loses Nov. 2.

"We win, insofar as we are entering the political process and stirring up the interest of the Latino community," Avelar said. "It's like testing the waters, because we see the significance of participation, because of our numbers.

"The next phase of our evolution is the political aspect. We own houses, we have businesses, we're in the schools. Where do we go from here?"

Avelar was a child during the so-called "white flight" from East Palo Alto in the early 1960s. He remembers losing classmates who moved away, and feeling badly

about it.

And he thinks some tension because of the racial transition of the city is simply a part of life.

"Twenty-five or thirty years ago, I'm sure the white community spoke about the blacks who were coming in, but behind closed doors and in a very derogatory way," he said.

"And maybe 25 to 30 years from now, if the Vietnamese decide to move into East Palo Alto and the Latinos are here, the same thing is going to happen again.

"I've seen the changes in the community, and I feel that East Palo Alto is on the verge of turning things around. And how everyone pitches in to move East Palo Alto forward will really say how far East Palo Alto will go. If we don't include everyone, then the process will bog down." ■