

Tribune photos by Heather Stone

Illiana Elayan teaches her 6th-grade class Tuesday at Volta Elementary School in the Albany Park neighborhood.

Albany Park's cultures unite to mold future

Diverse community coming together to discuss concerns of longtime immigrant neighborhood

By Gayle Worland
Tribune staff reporter

If Najih Ihmud, the Albany Park shopkeeper killed Oct. 10 in a midday armed robbery, was targeted, as many believe, because his tiny store was isolated and dark, neighbors think they have a way to fight back.

Bring more light to the distances between them.

Ihmud's murder is one of the reasons nearly 1,000 residents are expected to show up Wednesday evening for the Albany Park Neighborhood Council Community Convention. The meeting, in the works for months, also has a larger purpose: To part the curtains between community groups that have long been isolated from one another.

The convention grew out of

a series of community dialogues in July, when more than five dozen representatives from religious, educational and social service organizations met, often for the first time, to brainstorm on community concerns.

"There was a real surprise of awareness... that whether you're from the Korean community or the Muslim community or the [Indian] Gujarati community, we're on the same road—and why are we doing this alone when we could do it together?" said Ted Johnson, a vice principal at Volta Elementary School, 4950 N. Avers Ave.

Long a port of entry for new immigrants, Albany Park has the largest percentage of foreign-born residents of any

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Michelle Iyu styles Hyun Ji Park's hair Tuesday at Angel Hair Mode, a Korean business that has been operating for 15 years on Kedzie Avenue in Albany Park. Signs along Lawrence Avenue reflect the diversity of the community, which will be gathering Wednesday for a forum on neighborhood concerns.

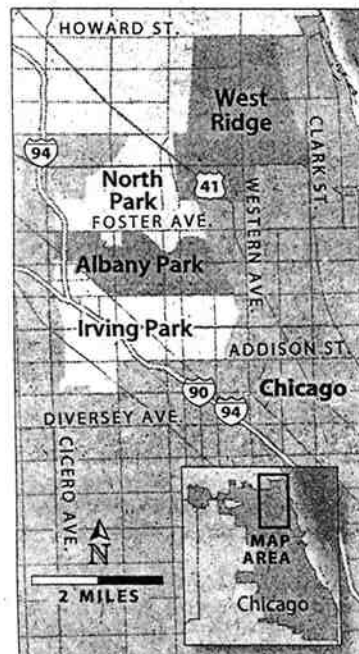
origin: Chicago; Sarajevo, Bosnia; Jerusalem; New Delhi; Hanoi.

Anyone at the community convention, at 7 p.m. Wednesday in Our Lady of Mercy Church, 4432 N. Troy St., can listen to the discussion in English, or put on headphones for simultaneous translations in Spanish, Korean, Gujarati or the Filipino language Tagalog.

The UN-style effort is necessary for a meeting expected to feature 36 speakers in 65 minutes. The main topics: affordable housing, education, immigrant rights, public safety and health care.

"What really unites people in this neighborhood are quality

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Sources: ESRI, GDT Chicago Tribune

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of life issues," said Kirk Noden, executive director of the 3-year-old Albany Park Neighborhood Council. "Safety, good schools, access to social services. We stay away from talking about U.S. foreign policy."

Founded in January 2000, the council started with small causes, such as installing speed bumps. "Then we started asking, 'How can we do something that's a little more concrete?'" Noden said.

"Ninety percent of all organizing efforts are like a flash in the pan. All these people get together, they march, they're on TV, and six months later, everybody forgets about it."

Like many parts of Chicago, Albany Park faces rising housing prices, said Syed A. Quadri of the Muslim Community Center. And Quadri, a resident since 1969, has noticed another change: Families are staying put.

While many immigrants four decades ago were highly educated and quickly moved on, today's newcomers tend to be less skilled and ready to settle down—in an area that is itself undergoing gentrification.

"Albany Park is No. 1 in the city in appreciation of property," said Mell. To help single-family homeowners, a neighborhood investment program begun in 2001 has doled out \$2.25 million in grants and matching funds to improve 326 units, he said. Another program helps landlords with repairs, as long as the buildings remain rental and one-third of the units qualify as affordable housing.

Still, Mobina Patel, 31, considers the rent—\$750 a month—steep that she and her husband, who works two jobs at Dunkin' Donuts, must pay for a one-bedroom apartment for themselves and three young children.

Patel, a native of India who works part-time at her children's school, loves Albany Park's diversity. Her neighbors include Bosnians and Mexicans, she said. "They're very caring."

Elizabeth Arroyo, 17, moved to Albany Park from Mexico nine years ago. She lives in an apartment with her three siblings, mother and father, who works as a landscaper in summer and at a carwash during the winter.

And she considers the neighborhood home.

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community in Chicago, community organizers say.

"It's a very safe neighborhood in my opinion," said Chicago Police Cmdr. Sam Christian of

the Albany Park District. In the case of Ihmud's murder, "it was very out of character for that sort of thing to happen," he said.

"There's still some gang activity in that area, although it's getting better," said Ald. Richard Mell (33rd). "It's a fascinating area to represent because it's so multilingual, multireligion, and everybody gets along."

Albany Park has a sense of color and bustle not unlike that of an international airport.

Along its retail hub on West Lawrence Avenue, signs blare bright reds and yellows and

shopkeepers shift easily from English to their native tongues and back again. At the World Relief office just down the street from Ihmud's shop, some 17,000 refugees have found homes, schools and jobs in Chicago, most in the surrounding neighborhood, in the last 25 years.

A predominantly Jewish area in the 1960s, Albany Park has seen large Greek, Korean and Romanian populations before today's mix. The pupils at Volta Elementary, all in white shirts and navy pants, file past a wall on which clocks have been set to the time at classmates' cities of