

How affluent Palo Alto PTA members are trying to save a working-class enclave

By Scott Herhold

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POSTED: 03/11/2015 12:04:12 PM PDT

The rules were strict on Monday. Each of the three speakers could talk for only three minutes. The idea was a quick presentation to the Palo Alto City Council and just as quick an exit. Hit them with your point and move on into the gentle evening.

But no one criticized Nancy Krop, the legislative director of the Sixth District PTA, for talking just a little longer. She is a tall, dark-haired woman with an eloquent way of speaking. And she was addressing a topic that touches the heart, the fate of the Buena Vista Mobile Home Park, a largely Hispanic working class enclave off El Camino Real.



Buena Vista Mobile Home Park in Palo Alto, Oct. 15, 2012. (Kirstina Sangsahachart)

Krop told the chambers that she remembered going to a council meeting where a 15-year-old Gunn High School student from Buena Vista stood up and declared that he wanted to be president of the United States. To do so, he needed a diploma from Gunn.

Noting that 100 children attend eight Palo Alto schools from the mobile home park, Krop urged the council to approve \$8 million set aside by City Manager Jim Keene to save the park.

"What's behind those numbers is a child, a child who believes that adults can fix things," she said. As you heard her say that, it made you want to go fix things yourself.

A MEMORABLE HOUR

It might have been one of Palo Alto's best hours. In a city of high achievers, affluent parents were stepping up to argue the case of working-class kids. At the request of Supervisor Joe Simitian, who asked residents to dedicate an hour of their time to save the homes of 400 people, several hundred people showed up Monday evening at City Hall. Without using public money, Simitian provided free pizza from Spot Pizza, which -- let us speak truthfully -- helped swell the crowd.

The battle is far from over: Though the county has voted to use \$8 million in affordable-housing funds to save the park -- and Keene has tentatively matched it -- the owners of the Buena Vista are moving forward with their plans to close the park and sell the land.

Given that precarious situation, nothing quite defied my expectations like the involvement of the PTA in trying to save the mobile home park.

BAD RAP

Over the years, the PTA has gotten a bad rap, emerging as a source of punch lines about box-top collections or apples on teachers' desks. Seventy years ago, an education writer, Virginia Scott McDermott quoted a school superintendent as saying, "There are very few PTAs I know about that are worth a damn. Most of them lack leadership, worthy aims, or objectives."

Count the Palo Alto PTA as a big exception. When Krop heard that the mobile home park could close, she got permission from the state PTA and the district to push ahead with efforts to save it. When she brought it to the board of the 17 Palo Alto Unified School District PTA chapters, she got unanimous approval.

She explained to me that there was a twofold reason for that stance. First, affluent kids benefit from the diversity that Buena Vista brings. Second, the kids from Buena Vista are precisely the people the PTA was created to represent.

"These are our children's classmates," Krop told me. "These are our neighbors. All of us are in the classroom, working with the children."

And maybe then some.

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