

CALIFORNIA

WALLS AND BRIDGES : USC Has Worked Hard to Repair Relations With Its Neighbors, but Area Residents Have Not Forgotten the Bitter Battles of the Past

By **DIANE SEO**

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In many ways, the brick and wrought-iron fence surrounding USC's campus symbolizes the "fortress mentality" that has distanced the school from its South-Central neighborhood over the years.

Whether intended or not, the fence is widely perceived by the area's mostly poor, black and Latino residents as an attempt by USC to shoo them away from its neatly trimmed lawns and stately buildings.

But while physical barriers continue to shield the university from its surroundings, many believe USC has taken much-needed steps in recent years to chip away at the wall that separates the affluent private school from its less fortunate neighbors.

Longtime community leaders, who in the past were quick to criticize USC for apathy toward its neighborhood, now praise the university for creating programs that reach out to local youths, families and entrepreneurs. And many people believe Steven Sample, who became USC's president in March, 1991, is more committed than his predecessors to helping the community in South-Central and on the Eastside, where the County-USC Medical Center and the university's health sciences are located.

But along with this optimism, bitter feelings remain. It is not surprising considering that the median family income in the area surrounding the South-Central campus is

\$16,369--about the cost of tuition for one year at USC.

“The university is trying a lot harder to improve its relationship with the community, but it may not be fast enough or as effective as people hope,” said Ezekiel Mobley, executive director of the United Neighborhood Council, a consortium of local business owners and residents trying to improve conditions near USC. “When you have a university in a community with so little resources, you’re going to have a ‘rubbing.’ ”

Alvin Rudisill, USC’s associate vice president of civic and community relations, describes the situation as a love-hate relationship.

“The reality is we’re big, and we look affluent and green, while people (in the community) are barely surviving,” he said. “It’s hard to sit three blocks away and say, ‘That’s a great institution.’ But there isn’t any question that communication is better and that the level of our involvement is much more intense.”

In almost every area where the university has attempted to reach out to the community--whether through education, business or social service programs--there has been positive as well as negative feedback.

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For instance, at the same time people are praising USC for involving Foshay and Adams junior high school students in an academic program that could lead to full scholarships

for some of them to attend the university, high school students from the same neighborhood are feeling snubbed.

Robert Barner, principal of Manual Arts High School, said USC is dragging its feet on a project that would involve a group of the school's students selling Ben And Jerry's ice cream on USC's campus. Barner said USC verbally committed to the project two years ago, but has not provided written consent.

"All we need is a letter of commitment from Sample, but we're still waiting," Barner said. "I've called him 10 to 15 times, but he's never returned my calls. So right now, the project is on hold."

For his part, Sample said he has heard "something about the project," but does not know what is causing the delay.

Barner said he has also asked USC if the school could use its baseball field and was turned away.

"There's some reaching out, but frankly I'm a little disgusted by what the university has not done for us," he said. "We have very superficial contacts with them."

Rudisill said USC's facilities are open to the community, but on a limited basis because the school cannot accommodate its own intramural sports teams.

In almost the same breath that the Rev. Brian Eklund of St. Mark's Lutheran Church talks about the university's successful Upward Bound education program, he brings up the issue of the swimming pool.

Before the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, McDonald's Corp. donated \$4 million to build a pool on USC's campus with the agreement that it be open to local youths for summer

use. Today, the pool is closed to anyone younger than 16; adults wishing to use it must pay a fee of \$50 per semester.

“The idea was for it to be a joint community-USC venture, but it’s now just a USC pool,” said Eklund, pastor of the church on Vermont Avenue. “I’ve never seen a person of color in that pool, except for a tan body.”

Rudisill said that the pool, more than six feet deep at its shallow end, is not open to children because it’s not a “playground pool.” “We can’t have young kids in a pool where you have to be an accomplished swimmer.”

At the health sciences campus, USC’s neighbors at the East Los Angeles Occupational Center appear to be pleased with its outreach efforts.

“Whenever we call for something, they always help,” said Howard Jones, health coordinator at the center. “They permit us to use their facilities, and all of the department heads there give us a sense that they’re trying to help.”

But the Eastside campus often is criticized for having few minority students. At the medical school, for example, 27% of the students are Asian-American, 12.5% are Latino and 6% are black. By comparison, the school is in a community that is 95% Latino, according to 1990 U.S. Census figures.

“We do have a responsibility to increase the number of minority students from the community,” said John Hisserich, USC’s associate vice president for health affairs. “And we’re trying to do that in a variety of different ways.”

USC frequently is labeled the “University of Spoiled Children” because it used to be “overwhelmingly white and rich,” Eklund said. But today, about 41% of USC’s students are ethnic minorities--19% Asian, 9% Latino, 5% black and 8% other minorities. And almost 60% of all its students receive some type of financial aid, university officials say.

Along with having a more diverse student body, USC is trying to encourage more of its students to get involved in the community. More than 1,400 students, for instance, receive credit each year for tutoring and counseling students at several local schools.

“There has been an attitude change that’s coming from the top--sort of like our national Administration,” Eklund said.

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With 17,000 employees, USC is the city’s largest private employer--a fact people often overlook when they talk about USC’s contributions to the community, Sample said. About 44% of the university’s faculty and staff are minorities.

“I ask people how they would feel if General Electric came along and said they would build a new plant that would build electronic widgets in South-Central and employ 15,000 people,” Sample said. “Everyone would say, ‘That’s terrific,’ but that’s exactly what we’re doing without considering the hundreds of other programs we’re doing. When I tell people that, it helps them understand the benefit we’re providing.”

In addition to maintaining a large work force, USC has established programs to help stimulate the local economy. One of the most noteworthy is the school’s Small Business Development Office, which opened in 1990 to steer more business to women and minorities.

When the office opened, 2% of the university’s procurement contracts went to women and minorities. Now, that figure has jumped to 9%, and university officials say their goal is to reach 15% by 1997.

However, USC still needs to increase its contracts with local entrepreneurs, Mobley said. For instance, only about \$4.5 million of the roughly \$129 million the university spent on supplies in 1991-92 went to firms within 6.5 square miles of USC’s two campuses.

“We pound on the table trying to convince the powers that be that they don’t need to go around the country to get their supplies,” Mobley said. “Everything they need could be made right here.”

USC also disappointed local merchants a few years ago when it decided to build its four-story bookstore, a Carl’s Jr. restaurant and several other businesses on its main campus, rather than in the community. Several years before, USC had assured local merchants that it had no interest in establishing businesses that would compete with them.

Sample said such actions do not indicate the way the university will conduct business in the future.

“I want to start more businesses adjacent to campus because it turns out that our two campuses are gold mines of opportunity for retailers,” said Sample, a member of the Rebuild L.A. board. “One of our real goals is to try to create an economic opportunity zone where if an entrepreneur wants to locate near our two campuses, we will help them find space and get financial assistance.”

He said the university tries to do as much as it can, but is facing financial restraints. Between 1984 and 1989, the university’s freshman enrollment averaged about 3,000 students. During the past three years, that figure has dropped to 2,400 students.

“We’ve also had to lay off several hundred employees and our financial aid bill has skyrocketed,” Sample said, noting USC provides \$60 million in financial aid--double what it was four years ago.

“Our first obligation to all of our constituents is to survive and thrive as a university because if we begin a downward spiral, we won’t be a benefit to anyone,” he said.

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The current relationship between USC and its surrounding community cannot be assessed without bringing up the past, because much of the tension that lingers results from disputes that occurred many years ago.

The whole issue of community relations publicly came to a head in 1972, when Thomas Kilgore, an African-American pastor at the Second Baptist Church, delivered a chiding baccalaureate speech to a stunned USC crowd.

“Knowing that the community held a dim view of the university, I criticized the university in my speech for being inept at dealing with the neighborhood,” Kilgore said.

Although John Hubbard, USC’s president at the time, initially was angry at Kilgore, he later appointed him director of the university’s first community relations office. Since the office opened in 1973, the university has expanded its outreach from a few programs to several hundred.

“I think at the present time, the atmosphere around USC is better by a hundred thousand percentage points than it was in 1973,” said Kilgore, who retired in 1989. “I think the office has made a tremendous difference.”

But during his time at USC, Kilgore also saw the university do things to further distance itself from its neighbors.

Shortly before the 1984 Olympics, USC started a long-term landscaping plan that included the construction of the fence. University officials say it was built for decorative and security purposes.

“I fought against it, but I didn’t have much weight,” Kilgore said. “I thought it was foolish.”

Despite the gate, university officials say the campus is open to the public. They also believe they should be commended for keeping their campus in the inner city, pointing out that Pepperdine University moved its campus from South-Central to Malibu in 1972.

Sample said rumors that USC plans to move by the turn of the century are unfounded. “We’re committed to staying in the area,” he said.

That is not to say that the university has not threatened to leave. Shortly after the 1965 Watts riots, USC was prepared to move because it needed to expand but did not have the money to pay local residents to relocate, said Oscar Jauregui, manager of the Community Redevelopment Agency’s Hoover Expansion project.

In 1966, the city responded by creating the first Hoover Redevelopment Project. While the project set out to build community-oriented businesses and housing, the agency’s main goal was to help USC expand its campus and to provide for much-needed student housing, Jauregui said.

It was during this time that one of the biggest battles between USC and the community occurred.

In addition to forcing local homeowners to leave so that it could build more dormitories, USC moved 315 of its students into 102 federally subsidized apartments with the agreement that it would build 300 units for low-income families by 1981.

USC failed to meet the deadline. But instead of forcing the students to move out, the city granted the university a two-year extension.

Many residents perceived the situation as typical of the university exerting its influence at the community’s expense.

One of USC's biggest challenges over the years has been to balance its own needs with those of the community's. One way the school has tried to accomplish this recently is through partnerships.

"I think it's a new day since Sample came on board," said Sister Diane Donoghue, director of the Esperanza Community Housing Corporation, a nonprofit provider of low-income housing. "We have a partnership with them to run our Head Start program, and President Sample wants to provide a housing initiative to help service employees buy homes in the area. To me, this is much more than a public-relations gesture."

Patsy Carter, who runs a bed and breakfast on 23rd Street, said USC seems finally to have realized that it cannot thrive if its neighbors are suffering.

"I think they have altruistic intentions, but I think they also see their own well-being tied to the community's survival," she said. "I call it enlightened self-interest."

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