

He's Keen to Clean a Place He Loves

A Koreatown resident hits the streets each week with others -- or alone -- to pick up litter.

By K. Connie Kang, Times Staff Writer
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Early Saturday morning, Brendan Finnigan, a 30-year-old Koreatown resident, stopped at a supermarket to replenish his stock of garbage bags and hefty gloves, and headed for the corner of Heliotrope Drive and Beverly Boulevard.

Parking his tan Toyota Corolla near a heap of trash on Heliotrope shortly after 9 a.m., Finnigan surveyed the bustling neighborhood of residences and businesses, its streets littered with trash of all kinds: paper cups, plastic utensils, beer cans, old batteries.

Recently, while driving through this area, he had made a mental note of it as his next cleanup target.

So, on Saturday, even as cars whizzed by on busy Beverly, Finnigan and six other volunteers picked up litter, swept and pulled weeds on three blocks.

"Very nice, very nice," said Jose Donis, a middle-aged man who lives nearby.

Finnigan, who works in Walt Disney Co.'s finance department, moved to Koreatown a little over a year ago. He is one of only four non-Koreans on the 32-member Wilshire Center-Koreatown Neighborhood Council and is learning Korean to better communicate with board members whose English is limited.

He has taken a leadership role in efforts by the council to clean up the area for the last three months.

Every Saturday, Finnigan takes charge of a three- to five-block area. When no one else shows up, he does it alone.

He does it because he loves Koreatown and its diversity.

"It's a different culture and a beautiful culture — people think with their heart," he said. "Ever since I moved to Koreatown, I have been learning so much. And I love it." On the street, sidewalk vendors were busy Saturday hawking wares as varied as paintings of the Crucifixion, sliced mangoes and boiled shrimp in plastic bags, and steaming tamales.

As Finnigan and the others cleaned up, the aroma of pastries from Guatemalan and Salvadoran bakeries wafted by.

Afterward, he and fellow board members Neil Prince and Karen Hallock — along with Sloan Fader, a Koreatown resident who has been a regular — lingered and visited with one another.

Hallock said she had learned a lot about the community through the work. For example, since the group noticed the lack of a shelter for bus riders waiting at Beverly and Kenmore Avenue, the neighborhood council has submitted a proposal for a grant to build one and plant trees, she said.

Among the volunteers who joined Finnigan's group Saturday were two Latinas from the neighborhood.

"We want to help our neighborhood look nice," said Hilda Ayala, who brought her 7-year-old daughter, Genesis, with her. Ayala even poked her gloved fingers into abandoned pay phones to remove the trash and pulled weeds along city drains.

"It's not easy to get up early every Saturday to go clean, but you feel so wonderful afterward," said Kara Carlisle, another board member who regularly volunteers. "It may seem like a small thing, but the impact is so immediate and direct."