

Spring St./Main St. Revitalization

In-studio guests: Brady Westwater, President, Downtown Los Angeles
Neighborhood Council
Jose Caballer, Co-runs, "Bank Art Gallery" and owner of the
"The Groop"
Insert/Video Clip guest(s): Names Unknown
Host: Lee Alpert

Lee: I'd like to welcome our first guest, Brady Westwater, President of the Downtown Los Angeles Neighborhood Council, "DLANC" for short. Brady, welcome to Neighborhood Café. I've lived in Los Angeles for many, many, many years and within those years I've noticed a change. I remember when people used to go Downtown Los Angeles for evenings dinners, theatre, musical, etc. And then it started to fizzle away and Downtown became a place where people really didn't want to go at night. Crime started rising and the homeless roamed the streets, but now all this is changing. There's a kind of revitalization taking place in Downtown Los Angeles. Particularly in the area of Spring Street and Main Street. Tell us about what's happening in Downtown Los Angeles and how the Downtown Los Angeles Neighborhood Council is involved.

Brady: Downtown Los Angeles Neighborhood Council is one the earlier Neighborhood Councils that was certified by the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners. If I remember correctly, is that how we met Lee?

Lee: Yes, Brady. I was the first president of the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners for the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment under Mayor Riordan. I was on board in the very beginning when the whole Neighborhood Council system was trying to get off the ground. Brady, tell us about DLANC.

Brady: We're still in our training wheels, but we've decided to tackle a number of huge projects that are really going to impact the whole Downtown LA community and Los Angeles as a whole. One of the things that we're committed in doing is returning to the core of the city, where the financial district used to be, where the theaters used to be, where the restaurants used to be and trying to again make it the center of Los Angeles.

Lee: You've brought some footage that shows all of the Neighborhood Council's efforts in action. Let's take a look at what's happening in Downtown Los Angeles.

<<video clip>>

Jose: About a year and a half ago we opened this space, thanks to Brady Westwater. It had been a bank, about ten years ago, and then it was empty for a while. We were able to open it for a combination of different businesses. It's a space for cultural events, but it also houses

three organizations. "The Groop," which is my company, "Amalpa Inc.," a technology company and U.S.C. has an office here for their nonprofit "Art in motion."

There's an advantage of having all these offices all in one space. It's also nice when all the surrounding companies that are coming in are creative, just like yours. Leasing this office space has also been incredibly inexpensive. The landlords that we worked with were also great. Our rate is unheard of anywhere in Los Angeles. I worked in the Westside for many years and I know what our square footage was there and there's no way a small company starting out would be able to support that. Now that my company is off of its feet, we have a total of 2,000 sq. ft. By 2005 we should be finalizing our financing and be 100% established. We hope to have 8 or 9 people on board. One thing that we pride ourselves with is that we hire people from the community. We primarily use consultants, but some of our employees do live in downtown. I, for one, live in downtown. I walk to and from work. It beats that long commute!

Unidentified Male Speaker: The type of business that I have here in Downtown LA is an art business. I have limited fine art, and fine art prints. I publish artists mostly from Mexico City and Los Angeles. I work directly with the artists who produce original prints. The main interest for me having my business in this area is because it seems that I am in the right place at the right time. Everyone around me is very excited, plus we're in a historic area of Los Angeles. In the space that I'm at now, about 600 feet of it will be converted to an art gallery. My grand idea, however, is to have part of the space be a loft, so I can do pre and post-production.

Unidentified Male Speaker: About a year ago I heard about a project in Downtown L.A. called "Gallery Row." At the time it was just a proposal that would designate part of Main Street and Spring Street a Gallery District with art galleries. When I heard about this, I wanted to get on board. We saw that the Los Angeles City Council was going to assist us in designating this area into the "Gallery Row." It actually happened rather quickly; quicker than we expected. Getting the actual galleries was a big step for us. I actually spent a lot of time moving into this space and now we're in already. Because I was involved in it since the beginning, I'm very proud to be here. I know that a lot of people feel that this is a gamble, but I don't feel or see it that way. You take a chance with all businesses and this one isn't different.

Unidentified Female Speaker: I'm really excited about the urban environment here in Downtown Los Angeles. When I arrived here in Los Angeles I had an art gallery at 2nd and Los Angeles Street, but at that time, the mass wasn't ready to support an art gallery in downtown. What I did was move to Santa Monica where art galleries were popping up everywhere. Six years later, I'm in downtown. My concept gallery is called "Weenie's." My plan is to make it into an art gallery and a hotdog place. We also want to make it a store for products, made by artists that cost less than \$50.00. Basically I want to create a non-elitist space for people to enjoy themselves, to see art, to support artists and to have a great hot dog.

<<End video clip>>

Lee: Wow, Brady what a great program! You and the Neighborhood Council are the ones that are behind it.

Brady: There are a lot of people involved in this project. One of the great things about Neighborhood Council's is being able to reach out to all the different groups in the community.

All these different groups of people came together and worked together to fix downtown. One of the first things we had to do was to target the neighborhood initiatives at the Mayor's Office. That got us some of our grant money and now the organization issuing that is becoming a subcommittee for an economic development subcommittee. This is just one way we're reaching out to existing resources in the community. We work better by working through the Neighborhood Council.

Lee: How many board members are in your Neighborhood Council are there? What does the group consist of in terms of the professions?

Brady: There are 27 board members and their divided among business, residence, public employees, private employees, arts, and social services. We even have a category for the homeless that live in the area because after all, they do live in downtown. We've gotten quite a bit of international coverage on that issue, but the point of Neighborhood Councils is involving everyone in a community. The unique thing about us is that we probably easily have the most diverse Neighborhood Council and yet almost all the resolutions that are passed are close to being unanimous. We have managed to find a way to find the common ground. There are a lot of things we disagree on, but what we're all interested in is making Downtown stand out.

Lee: Why do you think that many Neighborhood Councils have found it difficult to agree on many things?

Brady: I don't know, but I can tell you that people that are participating in our Neighborhood Councils are a really good set of pragmatists, very bright people, and are all interested about the community.

Lee: What made you get so involved in your Neighborhood Council? Is it the same reasons why everyone should be involved in their Neighborhood Council?

Brady: My interest in downtown comes from my family. I'm fourth generation Downtown LA resident. My family had an office on Spring Street. My family has been there for over one hundred years. I remember from family stories what Downtown LA used to be. I remember the very tale-end of downtown in the late 1950s when Broadway was full of theaters and department stores were still open. There was a Main St. gym, and the burlesque houses on Main Street. These were all areas where the whole city came and gathered. Our main goal is to make Downtown LA like that once again. L.A.'s living room and together with the City and the Neighborhood Council we can achieve that.

Lee: I live in Los Angeles, but don't get to commute too much into downtown, so I haven't seen any of the art galleries go up. How is the Neighborhood publicizing all this?

Brady: Many of the galleries are open now as you can see and we plan on having many, many, many more to open in the near future. We are also trying our best to try to open half-dozen restaurants, as well. One thing that we try to do is constant outreach, as part of the Neighborhood Council. That's one of our responsibilities. The Neighborhood Café, for example, is an excellent way of promoting what we're doing.

Lee: That's wonderful. How are you being funded? How are these individuals, who are the culprits that are trying to help renovate these buildings? How are they being funded? Is it all their own funding? Is the city kicking in? Is the Neighborhood Council assisting in doing that?

Brady: It's quite a few different sources. First off, we've got some landlords that understand that we all have to work together. Our landlords are giving these businesses very good rates. Some are even giving free rent, which is unheard of! Some are donating the tenant improvements. We also have the block grant fund through the CRA, which is the Community Redevelopment Agency. The Mayor's office has also been very helpful. It's just a collective effort between everyone in the community. People like Julie Regal who's helped out a lot.

Lee: That sounds like true community involvement to make it look the way they want it to look. Do you have like a time frame or timeline of when you want this transformation to occur? How are you judging the Neighborhood Council's success?

Brady: I think that if the people come in, business and costumers, then we've succeed. We have a city that's flourishing with creative people, so there really isn't a reason why this shouldn't be a success. The point is that together we can build common ground where everybody, every culture, every race, every type of art in the city, can flourish here.

Lee: Since we're talking about two streets, Spring St. and Main St. are there two different ideas on each of those streets or is it the same thing for both? Art galleries and lofts?

Brady: Physically, the two streets are quite different; Main St. has more low-rise, smaller buildings. Spring St. has very large old bank buildings; some are even 13 stories high. Having said this, those attributes necessitates a different type of environment. We are constantly trying to get innovative businesses in there. Just recently, Miramax is going to have their businesses in there. NBC just moved their production offices for their reality show, Last Comic Standing to downtowns. Now I'm looking at HBO. They're thinking of having a series and creating a co-op or an alliance if you will of film productions all in 1 building in downtown. All the creative industries in one place. It will eventually rival New York and London. These things are all ground breaking and the Neighborhood Council is on the forefront.

Lee: It sounds like a tremendous opportunity for the community and for the rest of us who live in Los Angeles. Brady, why don't we welcome our new guest who we just saw in the previous clip. Jose Caballer. Welcome, Jose. Jose, why did you chose to locate your business in Downtown Los Angeles and how did you and Brady first meet? You're living proof of what Brady's talking about.

Jose: Brady and I met at an art gallery. We blossomed a relationship from that and he told me about what was going on in Downtown L.A. As you can see, nobody could say no to what's going on here in downtown.

Lee: Tell us a little bit about your business, Jose. What is it and how did you decide to overcome the bad stereotypes of downtown, and actually open up a business and live in it. How has the Neighborhood Council helped you achieve your success?

Jose: There's been a lot of mixed reactions by a lot of people about starting a business here in downtown, but overall I think it's attracted a lot of people from the Westside of Los Angeles, and from other communities in L.A., as well. It's interesting to see that many other companies, organizations, and even schools are thinking of coming to downtown. U.S.C. brought down their Art Festival here. Orange 22, a furniture and environmental design company, came to downtown too. Amalpa, a technology firm that we're partnered with, too. Being able to bring all those people and their constituents to our neighborhood has made it pretty amazing. The press has also embraced the Neighborhood Council's ideas too. The *Los Angeles Times* has reviewed us many times. The community response has been great!

Lee: Let's not forget that you're a business man, and from the looks of it, you're a successful business man. From a business perspective, why do you think that you've been successful? I would assume that there are a lot of people in West L.A., Brentwood, and the San Fernando Valley that would prefer to visit local art galleries there or in the surrounding area. Do you think Downtown LA is populated enough? Are there financial benefits to doing that? Is it a start of something big?

Jose: I think that people always want to be involved with the latest thing and with what's new. When people have this notion, then I think that the financial reasons come second. There's risk in every business. Some of the partners that we work with and have a business in downtown, don't live here, but because their business is in downtown, they're throwing money into downtown. The work that the Neighborhood Council is doing is taking advantage of all these things. Like I said in the segment, I live in downtown, and I do feel that the benefits to that are well beyond financial. You're part of a critical mass of people in your city. Property values are increasing here more and more. The bottom line is that everybody needs to work together to really succeed.

Lee: Downtown LA actually needs a variety of businesses to survive, correct? We need homes in here as much as we need companies in the high-rises. The work that everyone is doing with Gallery Row is providing great opportunities for all these things to get done. It's a new power base.

Jose: Definitely. I think there's an opportunity to interact with all of the residents in the area and I think more and more, the occupancy rates are going to go up.

Lee: Bottom line is that we should all enter into a long-term lease in Downtown LA. It kinda seems like this is a perfect opportunity to invest in because the City believes in the concept that the Neighborhood Council and the business owners are developing. Another benefit you mentioned earlier was that you could walk to work because you live so darn close.

Jose: Our business actually tries to hold events where we bring down people to the community. By doing this we show them that the traffic isn't so bad and that you could walk everywhere. At our first event we brought down about 500 people to downtown. We're actually planning to hold a big event this month that will be sponsored by the Arts Center College of Design of U.S.C. and Cal Arts. Those people come and see our business and they see how excellent we're operating and then they in return are the one's who buy or rent the lofts in downtown. It's all because of the collaboration that we've had with the city and the Neighborhood Council.

Lee: Brady, since you've been awfully quite, let me ask you, are you proud of what you and the Neighborhood Council has established and achieved? Where do we go from here?

Brady: I can't begin to emphasize how much the Neighborhood Council has been a part of this. If it wasn't for DLANC I could honestly say that none of this would have happened. Of course the businesses like Jose's, as well. Like Jose mentioned, it's a collaboration. I've lived in downtown all my life and I've never met as many people that I've met since I've been on the board of DLANC.

Lee: I would presume that many people join the Neighborhood Councils with an agenda. What's yours or your fellow board members?

Brady: That's something that we establish early on. We first have to come to a consensus of what we want to accomplish and figure out how we're going to do that. We are also very open to the public because we want everyone to attend. We often times hold retreats where we discuss these things.

Lee: If you don't live in downtown and you want to come all you have to do is contact the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment. How do you guys handle letting people know what's happening in the rest of the communities?

Jose: One is what we discussed earlier with the big events that we have. We also use the press a lot.

Lee: I know that the Los Angeles Police Department and other law enforcement agencies are helping the communities like downtown, so that more business can come in, right?

Brady: There's a myth about the crime rate downtown. Most streets in downtown are safe. There's not that much person-to-person crime in downtown as people have thought in the past and now we're having more people on nights and weekends. It's become a considerably safer place to live and work.

Lee: Speaking about person-to-person crime, we just got a bill and I think that's a crime! I want to thank Jose for being here, as well as Brady. It's been a great program. If you would like to see other topics covered in the Neighborhood Café, please email your comments to the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment at www.lacityneighborhoods.com or you can call 1-866-LA HELPS, it's a toll-free number and for information about city services just call 3-1-1, it's your one stop to City Hall. So for everyone here at the Neighborhood Café, I'm Lee Alpert thank you for viewing.