

# Arts and Oak Park

The arts are central to Kevin Johnson's vision for urban renewal

By JoAnn Anglin

It would be hard to overstate the recent impact of the St. Hope Corporation on Sacramento's Oak Park neighborhood, often called Sacramento's first suburb. There is the St. Hope Foundation, the St. Hope Academy, and the 40 Acres business complex of theater, coffee shop, bookstore, barbershop and, soon, a restaurant.

The corporation, the brainchild of former basketball star Kevin Johnson, is involved in education, jobs creation and inner-city real estate development. Unlike most new corporations, though, this one has a full-time arts specialist on staff.

Kim Curry-Evans came to know Johnson when he lived in Phoenix and their families were acquainted. Curry-Evans, who studied art in college, was working for a local museum at the time and Johnson wanted to know more about art. "Even back then, he spoke of his goals for Oak Park, and that the arts would be integrated into the things he wanted to do," she says. "He could pick my brain for hours for information about the arts and artists." His goals came from a lot of thought and were not impulsive, she says. "I remember, as he talked, he'd sketch out his ideas for this corner."

She says this in the comfort of a new Starbucks at the corner of 35th Street and Broadway. It is one of several businesses in place or planned for the corner. The 20,000-square-foot, multi-use commercial complex is called 40 Acres, one of several sites owned by St. Hope. The business has completed the restoration of one old Victorian and will soon start another. St. Hope already has a contract for the Sacramento Philharmonic Orchestra to move into the newly remodeled building. "Kevin thought a lot about the revitalization of Oak Park, of

coming back and doing this, and art was always part of the vision," says Curry-Evans.

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They made allies in the mayor's office, City Council and Planning Commission. They made sure that the McGeorge School of Law, UC Davis Medical Center and other large employers in the area were aware of the fine neighborhood around them. At Broadway and Stockton Boulevard, they were overjoyed at the building of a large supermarket with good food at competitive prices.

And art was essential to all plans for renewal. More than 10 years ago, an outstanding jazz series began that continues every summer in McClatchy Park. Soon, palm trees were planted in the traffic meridians and an attractive "Welcome to Oak Park" sign was installed on Broadway near Alhambra Boulevard. A contemporary mural depicted a bright and happy scene from Oak Park's heyday. The exterior of the new supermarket was decorated with commissioned art pieces.

Last year, Johnson asked Curry-Evans to come to Sacramento to oversee St. Hope's arts programs. The goal is to provide exhibitions and related arts projects. The primary focus is on education. With each exhibit, she arranges the artists' receptions and discussions with the community, as well as other ways to facilitate the

participation of people for whom this may be a new exposure to the arts. The arts are a crucial vehicle for bringing community dialogue to the area.

Curry-Evans manages the small but growing art collection of the 40 Acres Gallery and Cultural Center and is responsible for bringing art exhibits to St. Hope from as far away as New York City or from as close as down the street. She sits on the board of St. Hope Academy elementary school, where she can make programming suggestions and work with the staff. "For example, we put up an exhibit and had the artists meet with the 30 kids that attend St. Hope Academy. They could observe the artist at work, usually a new experience for them, then try their hand at the techniques. When Chris Duke, a still-life artist, was there, it was the first time most of the kids had ever seen an artist at work. The school then built on that experience, and included a field trip to the Crocker Museum and meeting with the education staff there."

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She considers the complex at the St. Hope Corporation to be in the tradition of a "museum without walls." Its collections include paintings, his-



Kim Curry-Evans brings art to the community

torical photographs and artifacts from the area. "This building has incredible spaces," she observes, "and an incredible opportunity to create a dialogue with the art." Artworks are displayed in the corporation's offices, the bookstore, Starbucks and the barbershop. She is especially proud of an exhibit in The Cut Hut. Local photographer Tom Hulse was already working on a series depicting Oak Park barbershops when he and Curry-Evans met. That series is on exhibit for the customers and barbers to enjoy.

St. Hope also approached the Sacramento Metropolitan Arts Commission and secured funding to underwrite a six-month residency with the 40 Acres Art Gallery for San Francisco Bay Area artist Milton Bowens. He was given the use of a building owned by the St. Hope Corporation. This became his studio. The grant helped buy tools: notebooks, paints, brushes, etc. He oversaw the painting of a large outdoor mural that combines bright colors, street graffiti and profound

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social and historical commentary, among other elements. He also conducted twice-weekly workshops.

At once-a-month gatherings, Bowens spoke on many aspects of art. He included a showing of a video about the Harlem Renaissance, comparing it to what is currently happening in Oak Park. He took time to visit with students at the new Sacramento High School. At the end of his residency, Bowen grew so fond of the community and its dynamic activities that he decided to stay in Oak Park. His work was displayed at an exhibition, "Thinking Out Loud," at Underground Books, then later at the respected Midtown gallery, b. sakato garo.

The coffee shop has information on local activities. At 40 Acres, that might include a hip-hop weekend, recently arranged in conjunction with the Mondavi Center. Fliers promote readings, workshops and author signings at the Underground Books store. Others tell of the range of activities—



Artist-in-Residence Milton Bowens

plays, spoken word and poetry jams, African dance—held at the Guild Theatre, built in 1915, long needing rehabilitation, now remodeled and attracting audiences every weekend.

But St. Hope has also struck a chord in the larger Sacramento community, Curry-Evans points out.

Many people in Sacramento have fond memories of Oak Park from their own childhood and are excited and supportive of the efforts to bring it back.

For Curry-Evans, working with the St. Hope Corporation is a perfect job. "People think you can't do these things, but here in Sacramento, we're

actually making a difference. There is enormous potential here.

*Bowens' exhibit "Out of the Corner of My Eye," opens February 5 and runs through April 4 at the 40 Acres Gallery at 35th and Broadway. ●*