

Urban study takes new look at an old city

By KATHY PARRISH

Helen Justewicz was very curious about a Yemenite prayer center in her city's south end.

But it took a former Birmingham mayor and a New York photographer to get the Hamtramck city councilwoman inside.

"The girls were going in and asked if I wanted to come along," said Mrs. Justewicz, excitedly retelling her adventure.

"So I went in, didn't say a word and just kept looking around to see what was happening. Now we're best friends with people in that area."

Mrs. Justewicz tagged along with Birmingham resident Dorothy Conrad and photographer Joan Roth on one of several Hamtramck visits by members of Detroit area League of Women Voters (LWV).

Mostly suburbanites who'd never been inside the 2.6-mile city that is completely surrounded by Detroit, they walked the streets for nine months talking with as many people as possible.

The result is "Cities: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow," a booklet profiling Hamtramck's history, strengths and weaknesses. It also offers possible solutions to problems found by the researchers.

Aided by humanists from nearby colleges and universities, the 20 League members also put together a slide show about the area and photo exhibit on its diverse ethnic population.

"LEAGUE OF Women Voters has a strong commitment to the nation's cities; we believe in them," said project director Mrs. Conrad, whose organization promotes political involvement by its 1,491 members in Oakland, Macomb and Wayne counties.

"These problems are not unique to Hamtramck. They could be those of almost any city," said Mrs. Conrad.

The project, which took about 18 months, was one of 20 urban studies funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities through the LWV Education Fund. Costs beyond the \$3,500 grant were picked up by Detroit area Leagues.

Taking part were LWV members from Birmingham/Bloomfield, Detroit, Grosse Pointe, Rochester, Royal Oak, Northville-Plymouth-Canton-Novi, and West Bloomfield/Farmington.

The aim for members was to learn about the "urban condition" and to share political know-how.

"We become so stuck on being suburbanites that we often have no idea what goes on in urban areas," Mrs. Conrad said to Rochester LWV members who recently viewed the slide show.

"And we also must understand how all of us played a part in the demise of cities."

At first, the women considered studying a Detroit neighborhood. They opted for Hamtramck because of its manageable size and the impact of the car industry on the home of Dodge Main.

To make it a "people-oriented" study, League members walked up and down narrow streets and alleys talking with residents, shoppers, storeowners and workers. Along with city officials, they interviewed people suing the city



Hamtramck High School's industrial education room is the setting for this photo by Joan Roth for the Detroit area League of Women

Voters project, "Cities: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow."



Baked goods are one of Hamtramck's special resources, which the League researchers admitted to carrying home almost every time they visited the city. (Photo by Joan Roth)

— a larger population than they expected.

"We investigated as if it were a city we were thinking about moving into," said Mrs. Conrad, who admits to becoming somewhat of an "ambassador" for the city she hadn't visited in 25 years.

"We got a real feel for the city, perhaps noticing things a professional team wouldn't."

LITERALLY STANDING on street corners interviewing strangers, the women were frankly surprised at the responses residents returned. The population they encountered was largely Polish, but it reflected a half dozen immigrant groups with only Albanians not located.

"People were open; they listened and asked us questions," said Karen Dregendel of Avon Township. "It could have been very delicate."

Even more delicate than interviewing strangers is giving them advice. But the women are finding a warm reception even now that they are revealing their findings.

At a recent meeting of the Area Agency on Aging which handles Hamtramck, Mrs. Conrad and LWV president Libby Richards of Royal Oak were guest speakers.

While viewers suggested additions to the slide show and felt some LWV suggestions were too costly, the women were well received.

Among Hamtramck's strengths, the women noted the city's concern for its aged, many unique restaurants and bakeries and neat neighborhoods. They found residents' high regard for family, church and country crosses ethnic boundaries.

"They also discovered city financial problems, collapsed sewer and water lines, unplanned city renewal and lack of black representation in city government. One big problem they see is a failure by Hamtramck groups to accept others they view as being different."

"NOBODY PLANS anything in the



Small Hamtramck residents nap at the day care center in Corinthian Baptist Church. (Photo by Joan Roth)



A range of Hamtramck faces are shown in the League of Women Voters photo display.

city of Hamtramck. Everything just happens," Mrs. Conrad said. "One suggestion we made was that they should plan something whether it's sewers, tax collection, whatever."

"This city, like most cities, has not acted — but reacted."

Included in the study are suggestions for city improvements. Some, like upgrading and widening alleys, adding an international center to foster friendships across ethnic lines, or building more playgrounds, are expensive propositions.

But others are inexpensive fix-ups that citizens can do themselves.

"To carry out these beautiful plans

you need money," said Stanley Nowak, an advisor for the Area Agency on Aging.

"Sir, there are things citizens can do that don't require large amounts of funds," replied Mrs. Conrad, suggesting cleaner sidewalks and flower baskets in front of stores.

"We want citizens to become more involved in government," said Mrs. Richards. "I hope the message will come through when we talk to groups; get involved to make your city better and preserve its strengths."

"Some people think we were too soft on the city. Others who like the way it is now thought we were too hard. But they all see value in it," she added.



Stanley Nowak, an advisor to the Detroit area Agency on Aging, reacts to the League of Women Voters' slide show.



Hamtramck Councilwoman Helen Justewicz tagged along with the researchers out of curiosity.



Birmingham resident and former mayor Dorothy Conrad, who headed the urban study, explains the League's findings to a meeting in Hamtramck Community Center.

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