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Posted on Tue, Sep. 24, 2002

The Mercury News

STANFORD, EAST P.A. UNEASY PARTNERS

PRIDE IN SELF-SUFFICIENCY TINGES RESIDENTS' GRATITUDE FOR HELP

By Thaa Walker and Kim Vo
Mercury News

In East Palo Alto, they praise Stanford University for helping the city's children prepare for college. They credit the technology center, founded by a Stanford grad, for teaching them Web design. They thank Stanford-educated lawyers with fresh flowers and bowls of jello salad for fighting their legal battles for free.

But East Palo Alto residents also say Stanford takes as much as it gives -- that it seems Stanford scholars travel down University Avenue only to study poverty, crime, health and other socioeconomic issues.

That paradox is at the root of the complex relationship between the elite university and the struggling city where Stanford has played an integral role for decades.

Stanford students and alumni say they are just trying to do some good where it is most needed. But in East Palo Alto, where a desire for self-determination runs deep, gratitude often collides with pride.

"The feelings run everywhere in this city, from 'We hate them' to 'We love them,'" said council member Sharifa Wilson, whose son attends Eastside College Preparatory, founded by Stanford graduates.

"We love them because they put resources into the community; because they provide brainpower and money. The hate part comes because people have felt that Stanford has used us as a lab -- that they only want to do research and use us as guinea pigs."

In this 2.5-square-mile town where there never seems to be enough money for basic services, the drug clinic, the technology center, the community development non-profit center, the small business incubator and the only high school were all founded by someone from Stanford.

And this fall, Stanford will open a free legal clinic to replace the beloved East Palo Alto Community Law Project. Founded by Stanford students, the law project closed in August after nearly two decades because of money troubles.

Lawyer training priority

The law school's dean has called the new clinic "a gift to the community." Residents are grateful, but the plan has rekindled feelings of being used because Stanford has made clear that training future lawyers is its priority.

Stanford's involvement in East Palo Alto stems from a tradition of public service and the feeling that privilege carries with it a mandate of social responsibility. Professors and idealistic students -- rich and poor -- feel moved to address the harsh contrasts between their campus and the city just a bike ride away.

"We all believe in the goodness of what we're doing," said Jesse Moya, who volunteered while a Stanford undergraduate and now oversees a program that brings East Palo Alto youngsters to the university for classes and tutoring.

The university began playing a major role in East Palo Alto during the civil rights movement, when black students traveled across Highway 101 to -- as one alumnus from that era put it -- uplift their own. Dozens of programs have flourished since.

There's often no specific person or event that residents blame for their unease about Stanford. Rather, it stems from loose memories of being interviewed for research papers or having their experiences collected for some Stanford-sponsored study, such as health care and African-American women. It has arisen from watching students tramp through town for a lesson on gentrification.

In many ways, the perception is a byproduct of the power imbalance that colors any relationship between benefactor and beneficiary.

Sources of resentment

Some resentments grew from watching those with Stanford ties come in with money and support that have eluded residents. Eastside College Preparatory High School, for example, receives significant donations from outside the city, while Shule Mandela Academy, a private school founded by a resident, closed in 1999 after failing to attract similar support.

Others feel programs have been imposed without anyone asking what the community needed. City leaders, for instance, were offended in 1994 when Stanford MBAs launched Start Up, now a respected business incubator, without consulting the community.

And some residents say they have sometimes been disappointed by well-meaning but unreliable students who sometimes start but don't finish projects.

``Once they wanted to get deeply involved in our problem with high school dropouts in the 1980s," said resident Ruben Avelar. ``They built up expectations but they didn't follow through."

Skepticism has eased over the years, partly because Stanford has tried to address it. One campus minister runs a student tour that covers the city's history and introduces students to residents and organizations. The Haas Center for Public Service, which oversees many undergraduate volunteer efforts, offers students cultural sensitivity training.

``We take very seriously our responsibility to educate our students to enter any community with knowledge and respect," said Suzanne Abel, external relations director at Haas.

Even so, what happens with the new legal clinic will test how far the Stanford-East Palo Alto relationship has come.

``It will either turn out to be a truly great partnership or a really good example of what could go wrong," said Mayor Duane Bay.

Stanford's clinic will offer legal aid on housing issues, a pressing need in a city with many low-income tenants, and other services.

Self-interests

But the law school has made it clear the new clinic will serve fewer clients than the defunct law project. With fewer services, they say, students can get more in-depth training.

``Stanford has Stanford's interest at heart. Let's be honest," said William Webster, an East Palo Alto resident who works on campus and was a supporter of the law project. Webster and others have opened a community law clinic to complement Stanford's clinic.

Expanding legal clinics is part of Stanford's strategy to make its law school the nation's best. Still, officials have made efforts to reach out locally.

Dean Kathleen Sullivan has met with the mayor, and in July visited East Palo Alto to give an update about plans for the clinic.

After the program is running, she said, the law school intends to form a community advisory board. She offered her e-mail address and invited residents to contact her. Then she made her apologies; she was late for a Stanford engagement.

Sullivan ducked out, so she missed Barbara Mouton. Mouton, the city's first mayor, strode up to the microphone. She was sorry the dean would not hear what she had to say.

``Stanford can lead if it desires," she said. ``But we want the community to be part of this. If Stanford has complete control, we're going to come up second."

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