

## Grief brings neighbors together

Montalvin Manor honors child killed on railroad tracks

By Tom Lochner

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The family of 11-year-old Ruben Anthony Torres wants everyone to know that the Montalvin Manor community cares.

"Since my son died, people have been coming together," said Ruben's mom, Danielle Romero. "It could have been one of their children."

Ruben, a sixth-grader at Montalvin Elementary School, was crossing railroad tracks with some friends last year when he was struck and killed by a train.

On Friday, the day after Thanksgiving, Montalvin Manor residents, including about 30 of Ruben's extended family and friends, installed a memorial stone in the community park. On Saturday, they will dedicate the memorial and unofficially rename the park after Ruben.

"People think nothing good comes out of this community," said Ruben's uncle, Anthony Cordoba. "We're trying to show them different."

"Here everybody cares."

Many in the unincorporated West County community of 2,760 long have felt neglected by Contra Costa County, although residents generally give county Supervisor John Gioia high marks for paying attention and trying to set things right.

Montalvin Manor's storm sewers habitually overflow during rainy season; illegal dumpers regularly drop truckloads of household refuse on community streets; law enforcement presence is sparse.

Picnic tables, benches and other park structures are covered in graffiti, much of it gang-related. In April, someone torched and destroyed the park's play structure in what many residents think was retaliation against their efforts to take back their park and community.

On Tuesday, the Board of Supervisors allocated \$50,000 to replace the vandalized play structure. And on Friday, county workers will remove graffiti in the park.

"The past is the past; part of what we're doing is changing the history," Gioia said. "It's great that the community has taken the lead and the county is working with them on this dedication."

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"I think we have shown that we're being responsive," he said, citing a "team effort" between his office and the county Public Works Department.

Adding to the community's sense of adversity is its location alongside the Burlington Northern Santa Fe railroad tracks, which run atop a berm that blocks Montalvin Manor from the MonTaraBay community center and some adjacent, mostly unmaintained ballfields, which it shares with two other unincorporated communities, Tara Hills and Bayview Park. To get there legally requires walking or driving more than a half-mile; many pedestrians take the short cut through a hole in a fence that parallels the tracks.

"Since I was a kid, that same hole has been there," said Romero, who grew up in Montalvin Manor.

With few recreational opportunities, children gravitate to San Pablo Bay, where they throw rocks into the water or go fishing. To get there, they cross yet another set of tracks, the Union Pacific Railroad tracks, which carry freight trains as well as Amtrak's Capitol Corridor trains.

On the early evening of October 26, 2006, Ruben was heading home with some friends after playing along the Bay shore when he was struck by a Sacramento-bound Amtrak train. He died a little more than an hour later at an Oakland hospital.

"There's really nothing for the kids to do," Cordoba said. "I used to go (to the Bay) to take him crab fishing."

The memorial, which includes a 3,000-pound slab of chert rock with a picture of Ruben and a cross on a concrete foundation with palm prints and inscriptions from friends and family, was installed with the support of county Public Works but without any county funds, said Bob Van Bibber, a community leader. A white birch sapling alongside the stone will be tended to by Ruben's grandfather, Van Bibber said.

Community leaders knocked on the doors of all of Montalvin Manor's 600-plus houses to raise the funds for the memorial.

"Less than 10 houses didn't give anything, even though the economy is slow," said John Bieth, another community leader. Local businesses chipped in with gifts of services and sales of materials at cost. Bieth, a contractor, managed the installation and also donated materials.

"We're hoping this memorial makes it impossible for people to forget that Ruben was here," Bieth said. "It's also a stone to beckon to the powers-that-be to solve the problem that created the situation."

Bieth and Van Bibber want the county to install a bridge over the Burlington Northern Santa Fe tracks.

"They promised us a footbridge 18 years ago," Van Bibber said.

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The park, for now, will remain under its old name of Montalvin Park on county records.

"Whatever they call it over there at the county (administration), it don't mean a hill of beans to me," Van Bibber said. "This is Ruben's park."

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### **If you go**

- WHAT: Dedication ceremony
- WHEN: 10 a.m. Saturday
- WHERE: Ruben Anthony Torres (Montalvin) Park, Denise Drive north of Bonnie Drive, Montalvin Manor
- For more information and to donate cash, food or drinks, contact Bob Van Bibber at 510-334-3743 or John Bieth at 510-967-8172.

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