

NORTH PARK NEWS

Vol. 15 No. 3

SERVING SAN DIEGO'S PREMIER BUNGALOW COMMUNITIES

MARCH 2007

Palisade Gardens Builder's Social Conscience Developed From Many Stories

Robert Ito wasn't able to become a social worker, so he framed a career helping build housing for low-income families

By Manny Cruz

Developer Robert Ito has spent more than 30 years building affordable housing projects for low-income families. He says he got his social conscience from his parents. His mother, Emi Ito, was sent with her nine brothers and sisters to a Japanese-American internment camp in Poston, Ariz., in 1942 following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. His father, Martin Ito, became an infantry hero of World War II while his own family was interned at one of the camps.

"I think a lot about what my parents went through. It's what drives me," says Ito, 56, CEO of Ito Girard & Associates, a company he formed in 2004 with retired banker Roxanne Mariko Girard.

The San Diego native is awaiting the completion this month of his latest development project, Palisade Gardens in North Park, a 32-unit mix of for-sale studios and one- and

two-bedroom condos and one four-bedroom condo.

The building on University Avenue at Utah Street is named after the Palisade Gardens Roller Rink, which operated between 1946 and 1988 at the site. The rink was torn down in 1990 and apartments with street-level commercial took its place. Ito's company purchased the property in 2005.



Developer Robert Ito says he fell in love with the history of the old Palisade Gardens Roller Rink, now the site of his Palisade Gardens condo project.

Though Palisade Gardens is not an affordable housing project — prices range from \$159,000 to \$465,000 — Ito says he fell in love with its history. He integrated the rink's marquee and tower into the complex. "My contribution to North Park's revitalization effort is to bring back the historical value of that site," says Ito.

Real estate was the furthest thing from his mind — if he thought of it at all — when Ito was a teenager attending Morse High School. He was, he says, the "go-to guy" for friends who needed help with their problems. "I was a good listener. I was attentive. Those were the things they saw in me," he says. "I decided then that I wanted to get into a helping profession."

Ito took that conviction to college. After Morse he attended United States International University (now Point Loma Nazarene) and obtained a master's degree in social work from San Diego State in 1974.

"There were no jobs for social workers then," says Ito. "But there was a federal job training program and I wrote a proposal for it and it was funded."

In 1975, Ito formed Occupational Training Services, a nonprofit agency administering federal job training funds, and became its executive director. In the early 1990s, Ito convinced the board of directors to enter the affordable housing field, leading to the creation of the San Diego Community Housing Corp. In the 10 years that Ito spent as CEO of the agency, its affordable housing portfolio grew to 1,027 units with a market value of more than \$102 million.

One of Community Housing Corp.'s earliest projects was Hacienda Townhomes in Downtown's East Village, a 52-unit project completed in 1994 for low-income families. The complex of two-bedroom and three-bedroom rentals has been fully occupied since it opened and there is a waiting list. "There are young professionals working in high-rise buildings and there are low-income workers working in hotels Downtown," says Ito. "You

try to have a housing mix that is balanced. Our idea with Hacienda was to locate housing Downtown so the service workers wouldn't have to drive so far to go to work."

Ito left the affordable housing market three years ago to devote to his development company. Besides Palisade Gardens, the company has projects in El Cajon, City Heights and the San Diego State area, among others. "My goal is to focus on inner-city neighborhoods and try to bring new housing into the market in the low \$300,000s so we can help low-income people become homeowners," says Ito.

Ito's parents live in Encanto on land where they used to operate a vegetable farm. His mother, who is 82, was born in Calexico. His father, 89, also was scheduled for internment but enlisted in the Army's 442nd Combat Infantry Team, an all-Japanese-American unit that fought in the European theater. Martin Ito, who suffered shrapnel wounds from a bomb, returned home with a Bronze Star and Purple Heart. ♦



The old Palisade Gardens Roller Rink is now the site of the Palisade Gardens condo project.