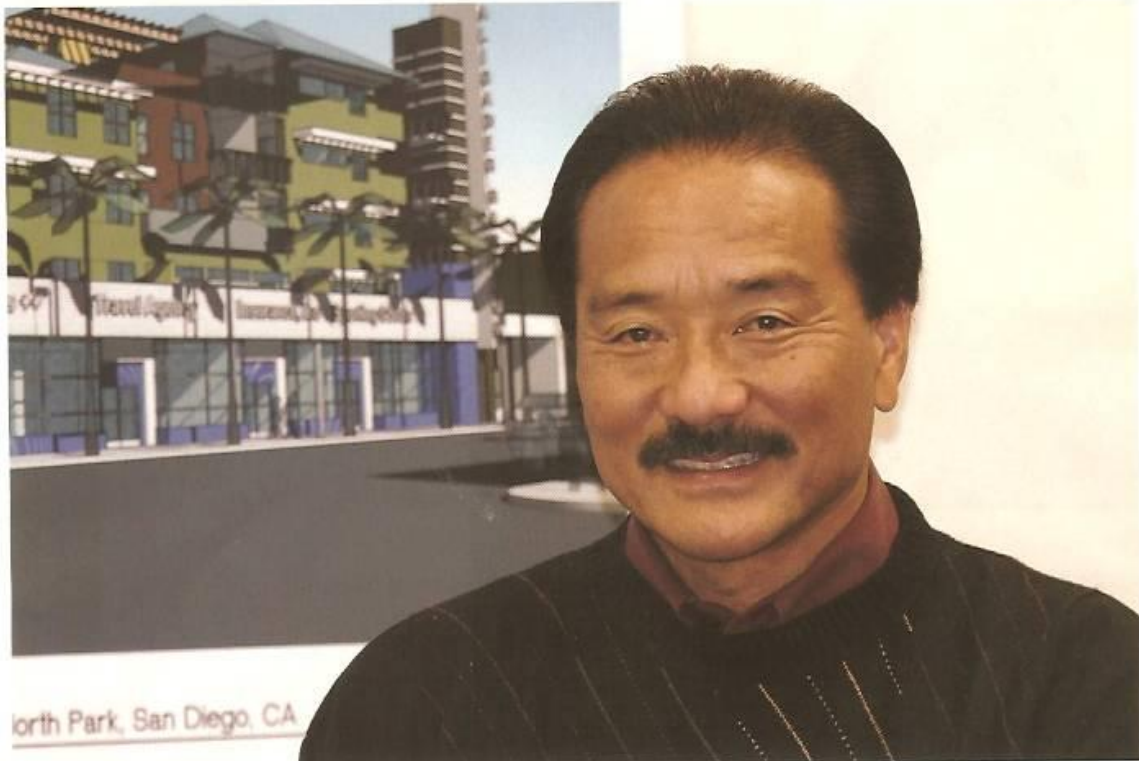


SAN DIEGO HOME/GARDEN

L I F E S T Y L E S ®

Community Commitment

Robert Ito helps people help themselves



Robert Ito helps people help themselves. You might call him a “social entrepreneur.” As CEO of Ito Girard & Associates, an urban real-estate development company, Ito develops property and builds homes in San Diego’s older neighborhoods. His background for such work? You might think construction, sales, marketing, accounting, financing, or architecture and design. Think again. How about social work?

That’s what Ito, 55, did before founding his company with colleague Roxanne Mariko Girard, a retired banker, almost two years ago.

For 31 years before that, Ito, first as CEO of Occupational Training Services (OTS) since 1973, then in the same position for the San Diego Community Housing Corp. since 1994, focused on helping people find jobs and affordable housing. Now he builds two- and three-bedroom homes as investment properties.

The skills he has relied on more than any other are listening and patience — the same skills he honed as a social worker.

"He has great negotiating skills and the ability to work with people from A to Z," says Marie Cruz, an associate of Ito's. "He's very thorough and researches everything. That comes from the non-profit sector, where he had to know everything. He doesn't go headfirst. He goes step by step to make everything right."

Ito grew up in San Diego, earned his bachelor's degree in sociology from United States International University, now Alliant University, and his master's in social work from San Diego State University.

"Sociology was right up my alley," he says. "Ever since high school, I was the go-to guy for my friends with problems with their girlfriends or their families. I'd sit down and talk. I was a great listener. I think that was one of the things I felt comfortable with. It became natural and generated my interest in social work."

In 1973, he and Russell Thresher, an attorney, got the idea for an agency that would provide on-the-job training for individuals not fortunate enough to complete their education. That became Occupational Training Services, which was designed to build career opportunities that would eventually lead to economic self-sufficiency.

"The purpose of OTS was job training," Ito recalls. "But over the years it became very clear to me that finding a job for low-income San Diegans was only one part of the equation." Just as crucial were housing and child-care, issues "that kept coming up over and over again," Ito says.

"We would find someone a good-paying job, but then they would end up paying 50 percent of their gross income on housing."

By the early 1990s, his partner Thresher issued him a challenge: "What can OTS do other than find people jobs" to make them self-sufficient?

Affordable housing became the answer.

So, in 1993 the two formed a non-profit subsidiary, the San Diego Com-

munity Housing Corp., "to increase, preserve and improve quality, affordable housing opportunities for working families." Says Ito: "Once I got my master's degree, I wanted to work with people to try to find them jobs. It was natural for that to evolve to the next level, to be able to live. That was the springboard for the Community Housing Corp."

Over the next 10 years, through subsidies and tax credits, the corporation developed, by building or acquiring, more than \$14 million in projects for local residents, including 1,027 affordable multi-family properties and 88 single-family homes.

The current market value of those projects is \$102 million.



However, with the competition for non-profit dollars growing increasingly in recent years, Ito decided it was time for a change: "I reached a point in my life where I said 'I want to venture out into the private market,'" he says.

Since 2003, Iro Girard & Associates has been developing single, multifamily and mixed-use projects, as well as organizing financing, refinancing and selling and buying properties for the general market.

While his focus is still affordable housing, the clientele he serves now include families with household incomes in the \$50,000 and up range — police, fire fighters, teachers — compared to the families he used to help before, with incomes of \$36,000 or below.

The company's current projects include Ouchi Courtyards, 64 condominiums and row houses at 5003

Imperial Avenue, and Creekside Point, 24 town homes slated to open before the spring of 2006 at 53rd Street and Naranja Street in Chollas Creek. Homes in Creekside Point will sell from the low \$400,000s. Other homes sell for less.

Ito's commitment to housing and families stems from his strong commitment to community. A former board member of the Centre City Development Corp. and one of the founders of the Asian Business Association of San Diego, Ito has served on the board or been involved with the following organizations, among others: LEAD San Diego, Neighborhood National Bank, Workforce Investment Board, Kiku Gardens, the East Village Community Action Network and the San Diego Japanese American Citizens League.

"He believes totally in getting involved with communities. He lives what he preaches," says Cruz.

Ito's roots also go back three generations to his grandfather, Yen Kichi, who came from Japan in the early 1900s to start a farm in the Encanto area. His ancestors lost their farm when they were interned after the outbreak of World War II with Japan. While in the camp, Ito's father, Martin, enlisted in the Army and served with the all-Japanese-American 442nd Regiment that was immortalized first in the 1951 movie *Go for Broke!* and again in the 2005 movie *Only the Brave*.

The legacy of those Japanese Americans was honored recently at a luncheon in their honor in which Ito gave the keynote address.

Pondering how things may have been different if there weren't a Pearl Harbor, Ito says, "We cannot rewrite history. We can only record it."

In Ito's case, he may not have rewritten any history, but his stamp is certainly a part of the lives of 88 families who otherwise would never have realized the American dream of home ownership.