

'Going Home': Ron Claiborne Returns to Oakland, Calif.

Programs Give Youth, Jobless Another Chance to Turn Their Lives Around
Reporter's Notebook by RON CLAIBORNE
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I was born in San Francisco but lived there only two days, which is when my mother and father brought me home to Oakland. Oakland, the city across the bay forever in the shadow of San Francisco, would be my hometown for the next seven years, when my family moved to Los Angeles.

Since I was a young child during the time I lived in Oakland, my memories are pretty hazy and episodic. But to this day I have a very vivid sense of growing up in a world that now seems idyllic. The street we lived on, Calmar Avenue, sits atop the ridge of a hill just north of Lake Merritt. The homes are large but not opulent. The street was quiet and tree-lined. It sounds like a cliché, but people really did know their neighbors and left their front doors unlocked.

My best friend was a kid named Ocie Henderson, who lived across the street from us with his mother and two older brothers. Ocie's father died he was just 3. In the 1950s, this was an integrated street, which I only later would come to realize was unusual. Down the hill from where we lived were Lake Shore and Grand Avenues, the commercial district of our neighborhood consisting of small shops and a smattering of restaurants. Where Lake Shore and Grand converged was the palatial Grand Lake Theater, and next door to it hamburgers stand. My brother Keith, a year older than me, and I saw our first movies at the Grand Lake.

Going back to Oakland always feels like going home. Last week, I went home on assignment for "World News" to report on how Oakland had changed since I'd lived there and, in particular, how it had fared during the latest economic recession.

Oakland: 'Sinbad' on Grand Lake's Big Screen

I also got a chance to visit the Grand Lake where the management kindly allowed us to shoot inside before the day's showings. We brought with us a DVD copy of one of the first movies I remember seeing: "The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad," made in 1958, the year I turned 5. As I sat in the middle of the cavernous old theater with a bag of popcorn, Sinbad was projected onto the screen. It was as if I was traveling back in time.

The movie was, of course, ridiculous. The acting was decent enough, but the costumes, the storyline and the special effects -- especially the giant Cyclops that emerges from a cave (which scared the heck out of me when I was kid) -- were comical.

What was not at all comical was what I learned on our visit to East Oakland. The small, tidy houses on the side street belie a grim reality. This mostly African-American neighborhood is scarred by chronic unemployment -- 27 percent, according to local officials -- and so much violent crime that it bears the nickname "Killer Corridor."

We stopped by the East Oakland Youth Development Center, a community service organization that provides a refuge from the surrounding anarchy. The center offers educational help, job training, counseling and recreational facilities free to anyone who wants to drop in.

We met Sinead Anderson, who dropped out of school at 16 but later came to the center to get help with the GED.

"It was amazing," she said. "Everything [was] laid out, the math packet, the science. I passed [the exam] the first time."

Today, she is an undergraduate at Merritt Junior College, majoring in mathematics.

"I'm going to teach," she said. "I'm going to come back to my community and teach."

Last year, Victor Oliver, 20, got out of jail after serving two months for stealing stereo equipment. Home Depot, where he'd held a job, would not rehire him and he couldn't find work. At his girlfriend's urging, he dropped by the center. He began getting counseling to help put his life back in order but it was the birth of his child that convinced him he had to turn his life around.

'Everybody's Her Favorite'

The center's dynamic executive director, Regina Jackson, took a chance on Oliver and made him a counselor for younger kids.

"Miss Regina taught me that the kids could look up to me. They didn't have to look up to gangbangers and everyone else like that," he said.

He did well as a counselor, and when Jackson learned that a local Jamba Juice smoothie shop had an opening, she persuaded the manager to hire Oliver.

"Miss Regina, she plays favorites," he said. "Everybody's her favorite."

Jackson, 48, has spent 25 years at the center -- running it for the past 16. "We try to help make them better people, better attitudes, more education, more exposure to the real opportunity that exists inside themselves -- if they believe they can achieve. We try to develop that and then point them in the right direction so that they can make that a reality," she told me.

Oakland Unemployment: Twice National Rate

The unemployment rate in Oakland is more than 17 percent, nearly double the national figure.

To give you an idea of how hard the latest recession has hit this city of more than 400,000, the jobless figure for August 2007 before the national economy crashed was 7.7 percent. That should not suggest the local economy was doing well before the recession. Oakland's economy has been in decline for half a century, but the recent economic downturn was staggering.

On Calmar Avenue, down the street from the home where I grew up, I met Michael Elliott, an auto mechanic, and his father, John, a retired theology professor at the University of San Francisco.

Elliot, who's in his mid-40s, used to own an auto repair shop but lost it when the building was sold before the recession hit. His next shop went under, and he has been unable to find work ever since. He gets by now by servicing whatever customers he can find, going to their homes to do the work. He says more and more people are forgoing routine

maintenance to save money.

'Last Year Has Been the Worst by Far'

"The last year has been the worst by far," he said as he sat on the front steps of his parents' home. "I can't really pick up any jobs."

Things have gotten so bad, he has moved back in his parents. "If I didn't have my parents to fall back on, I would probably be homeless," he said.

I asked his father about the recent report that government economists say the recession technically ended last year.

"Oh, I don't believe that at all," John Elliot said. "I don't know what measurements they're using to determine that but, I mean, for the people on the street? We don't see it."

Against this backdrop of economic darkness, a bright "green" light shines in Oakland -- "green" as in green jobs in the construction industry.

Going 'Green' in Oakland

At 8 a.m. on a Wednesday, a dozen or so young men and women are going through a punishing regimen of calisthenics. This is the Oakland Green Jobs Corps.

The people hitting the floor to do pushups are trainees being whipped into shape so they will be fit enough for the physical rigors of a job in the construction trade.

The trainees also study everything from carpentry to blueprint reading, from advanced mathematics to how to install solar panels on a roof.

"The work that we're doing here is good for the economy and it's good for the environment," said Emily Courtney, the Green Jobs Training coordinator at Laney College -- one of the two training centers for the Green Jobs Corps. "It's the most cost-effective way to reduce greenhouse gases, and it's the most cost-efficient way to put people back to work."

The program provides 16 weeks of training for free and graduates about 130 people a year. Even in this weak economy, most of them get jobs, according to Art Shanks, executive director at the Cypress Mandela Training Center.

"We're batting about 75 percent in the total graduating class," Shanks said. "It's the best we can do at this time. Prior to the recession, we were batting 90 percent placement for each class."

Shanks introduced us to Mary Vanek, a 39-year-old mother of five, who graduated from Cypress Mandela's program last year. Before the program, she was barely scraping by on odd jobs. Now, she works for Turner Construction, helping to build a new hospital in Burlingame.

"I look forward to going to work every day. I don't think I've ever done that in my life," Vanek said.

We also traveled to Daly City, just south of San Francisco, to meet Angela Davis, who graduated earlier this year from the Green Jobs program at Laney Community College. She was on her break from installing energy-efficient windows at a low-income housing development. Before she was accepted into the training program earlier this year, Davis was out of work and living in a homeless shelter.

"I wasn't able to buy a dollar hamburger," she said. "I wasn't able to have bus fare to get on a bus to even look for work."

Davis loves what she is doing and has become an environmental zealot through her work at the Community Energy Services Corp., a nonprofit group that makes energy

improvements to local residents' homes. She now rents an apartment and has had steady work since finishing the training program in July. She says her life has been utterly transformed.

"This program provided for me just the stability of employment, a career and being able to provide for myself," she said. "It's amazing."

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