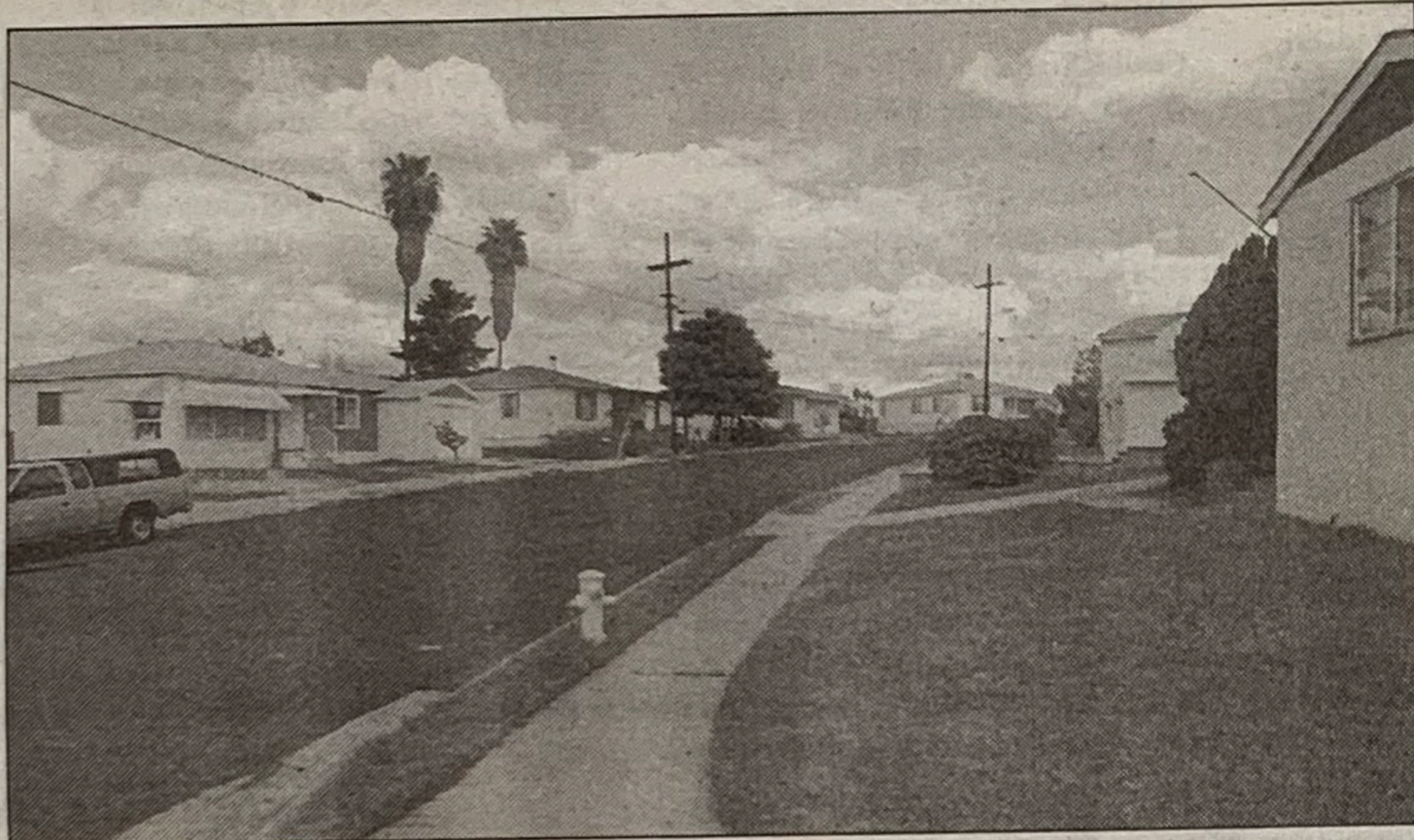


Calendar

Sniff Your Loan

Homebuyer Seminar



College Grove



City Heights

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVE ALLEN

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Consider the real estate agent, a stock character of our time. "Sell the fucker," the Charlie Sheen character says to one of them in the movie *Wall Street*. The middle-aged matron, who sold him the penthouse in the first place, talks too loud, wears ghoulish makeup, and, probably, too much perfume. In this reporter's experience, or so it may have seemed

LOCAL EVENTS

under house-shopping duress, such people will drive you around for hours — like

kidnappers, the only difference being that they don't make you ride in the trunk. The home inspector is another fearsome sort whose acquaintance a would-be homeowner must make. He'll scribble importantly on his clipboard, never saying a word, then hand you the list of troubles, along with his invoice — the bad news and the bill both at once.

Karima Robinson, financial literacy coordinator for San Diego Neighborhood

Housing Services, knows the process of buying a house can be intimidating and complicated, especially for a first-timer. She knows, too, that prices in this city can make interactions with realtors, lenders, and the rest seem, incongruously, like a privilege.

She has good news, however, as well as good advice. Although the average price for a single-family home in San Diego is "pushing \$160,000," she still sees clients who buy for well under that. "South San Diego is decent still, in terms of affordability," she says, citing City Heights, San Ysidro, and Imperial Beach. "Also, east San Diego, which would encompass Encanto; the west side of the College area; and some pockets of North Park."

Cheaper houses don't always have "For Sale" signs posted in their yards. To find them, Robinson suggests sleuthing. In a search of public records you may find a property that has been abandoned, she suggests. Robinson calls it "unfortunate," but the mortgage default list is another good public source.

She encourages aspiring homeowners to "advertise" themselves by talking to family and friends to find out if they know people who have been thinking of selling but haven't listed their property. "Because these people know you or know of you, they may be more trusting that the deal will be fair."

She tells the story of a mail carrier and his wife who bought their house from an elderly man on the mailman's route, in City Heights. Their cost: \$66,000; the house's value: \$120,000. Now, as part of the arrangement, the elderly man lives with the couple and is taken care of by the mailman's wife. Robinson knows a church member who bought a house from the son of a parishioner who died. This was in Oak Park, and the cost was \$120,000. And she notes two friends who wanted to live in the same neighborhood, so one of them, already a City Heights homeowner, asked his neighbors, and touted his friend, and finally found him a place — for \$110,000. Now the friends live on Upper and Lower Pepper, respectively.

Once the property is located and a price determined, there are plenty more potential deadfalls. That's why Robinson and the staff at the Neighborhood Housing Services offer homebuyer education. "We introduce people to all the documents and terminology. We try to teach them to ask the right questions." Such a query can be as simple as, "What exactly is this fee for?" In the classes one can practice getting the words out in a comfortable setting.

An Encanto man in his late 70s bought his house from his landlord, for \$110,000. He's happy because he'll never have to move again. But, says Robinson, those who usually become their students are "mostly young." Many are Hispanics with families. "We also serve a lot of single women. I'd say 60 to 65 percent

are female head of household, English speaking — that's their first language. A majority of them are divorced. So they're dealing with a single paycheck and maybe some of the debt from the marriage."

As lower-priced homes are sold, the surrounding neighborhoods grow more stable and prices inevitably go up. One may wonder what Robinson's philosophy is on that progression. "San Diego's an interesting city," she says. "You can find a half-a-million-dollar home right next door to a \$125,000 home."

The 90-minute class on Saturday is an orientation only. The organization offers two extended series of no-cost classes to people who want to proceed. One series takes six months and stresses savings and budget. The other is called Homebuyer's Express — four classes in two weeks.

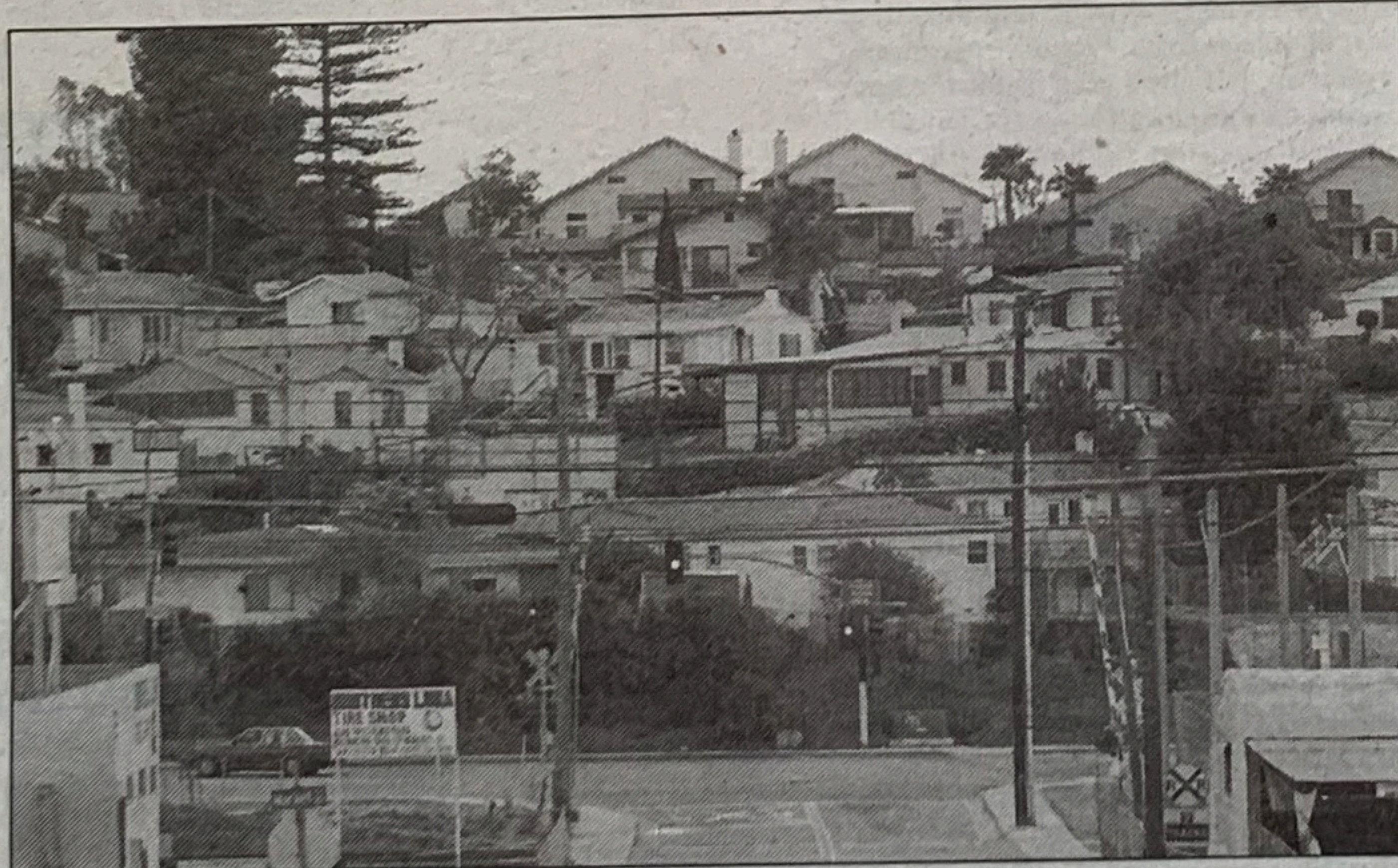
In each instance, Robinson says, the staff has the time to show a loan to students and ask them to assess it. "Is it a good loan or a bad one?" Her hope is that graduates will be equipped to do what she calls "the smell test" on their own loans.

Both groups meet real-live realtors, lenders, home inspectors, and insurance agents. With luck, they won't live up to stereotypical expectations.

For this weekend's session, reservations are recommended, but not necessary. Says Robinson, "We never turn anybody away."

— Jeanne Schinto

Homebuyer Education Seminar
San Diego Neighborhood Housing Services, Inc.
4336 54th Street, San Diego
Saturday, February 24
10:00 to 11:30 a.m.
Free
Info: 619-229-2370



Encanto