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OP-ED

Kankakee Gets Its Groove Back

By Luis Alberto Urrea

It seems the only time Chicagoans think of the small city of Kankakee 55 miles to the south is when the inevitable springtime storm warnings crawl across the bottom of our televisions. If a bad storm or tornado is coming, chances are pretty good that Kankakee is in its path. A few years ago, Kankakee was listed as one of the worst cities in America. David Letterman deepened the insult by shipping the city two prefabricated gazebos to elevate the livability factor.

When a Kankakee library board member, Mary Jo Johnson, recently invited me there to do a reading, she warned me to watch for wild turkeys on the highway. I expected 25 retired women in a quaint brick building. It took me three drive-bys to realize that the corporate tower in the center of town was the library and that more than 325 citizens of Kankakee were waiting inside.

This reception had little to do with me – and everything to do with Kankakee, the commercial engine of a county still reeling from an economic downturn. Kankakee is pulling itself back from the brink. And it all started with the library.

The one thing that the people of Kankakee know is that to rebuild a suffering city, you first have to reconstruct its culture, its community.

Mayor Donald Green, 63, has lived in Kankakee his entire life. But as Mayor Green started his 13th year in office last month, he did so in a town where 60 percent to 70 percent of the homes sold now are being bought by newcomers.

You could see that reflected in the audience at the library. There were the expected bright Midwestern faces. But beside them were the faces of people who once lived in the Chicago projects and the towns of Guanajuato State in Mexico, who were now working Kankakee's farms, nurseries and restaurants.

When Mayor Green realized that the overwhelming majority of Kankakee's Hispanic residents (who account for about 10 percent of its population) hailed from Guanajuato, he took a delegation of community representatives down there to forge an alliance. By creating a "sister city" relationship, Mayor Green wanted his newest citizens to understand they have a role in determining Kankakee's future.

"My philosophy is you can take this community, revitalize it, make it financially solvent," he said. "You give it all back to the people of the community because they are the ones who have the power."

When Provena Health abandoned its headquarters in the seven-story Executive Center in downtown in 2002, it was the community's idea to convert it into a library. Less than a year after the renovations started, the Kankakee Public Library moved from a

dilapidated 105-year-old building into a sophisticated showplace that extended over three floors.

This new public library had become the cultural hub of the city, crucial to its downtown revitalization. A new band and a satellite university campus have already been completed and a park with a water fountain is on its way. (Mr. Letterman's gazebos are still in use.) "It all started with the library," Mayor Green said. "I can't tell you how proud that makes our community."

Our cities are scrambling to find fresh paradigms for a new America. Maybe, just maybe, the Midwesterners, librarians, and Mexicans of Kankakee, Illinois, have found theirs.