

North Westdale Neighborhood Association

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RALPH PRIMO, FIRST PRESIDENT OF THE NWNA, TALKS ABOUT OUR NEIGHBORHOOD.

By Joan Winters—NWNA Secretary

Ralph and Celia moved into their house on Butler Avenue in 1960 where they raised their three children. "Longevity" comes to mind with these two lovely people. Not only have they lived here in North Westdale for 55 years, they have been married for 63 years, and are the proud owners of Primo's Donuts in our community, with its 60th anniversary coming up next year. Ralph Primo was the first president of the North Westdale Neighborhood Association from 1981 to 1983. It started as a neighborhood watch that Ralph organized due to a crime spike in the community. Just one month in 1980, six homes were broken into on Ralph's block alone.

Other streets in the neighborhood were also experiencing crime, and one neighbor was abducted and raped. At the time there was only one police car covering a wide area. Ralph said some fathers were patrolling some streets with baseball bats, but he was happy when they switched to flashlights! Crime-watch meetings were held in Richland School Auditorium and were well-attended by the community and crime went down. Ralph and his wife Celia attribute the crime spike to development in the area, including Hughes supermarket and the 405 freeway (where a quick escape could be made).

Recently I met with Celia and Ralph Primo and their son Ralph Jr. in their acclaimed donut shop on Sawtelle Blvd. The conversation was a history lesson of this community from their perspective. They continue to operate the shop, which has had three generations of Primos involved. They have described it as one of the few mom-and-pop businesses around here now, and the business is still booming. Wearing a crisp white apron, Ralph, who has just turned 85, said, "This place is our little gold mine. It has helped send our three kids to college and it's helped our businesses." They recall how in the 1950s through the 1970s there were other mom-and-pop businesses here in North Westdale. A few of you might remember some, such as Ward's Hardware and K's (Klein's) Delicatessen, both on National. The Primos also owned a successful Mexican restaurant for five years, Casa Primo, which was tucked away on the back lot of the Union 76 gas station near their donut shop. However, Union Oil would not renew their lease. Ralph said, "Union Oil had other plans."

They recalled the celery fields where Ralph's (supermarket) is now, and the corn fields from Sawtelle to Sepulveda, before the 405 freeway was there. Their son, Ralph, Jr., describes life in North Westdale when he was a child, as having a "Mayberry-feel; a small-town feel" to it. Their windows could be left open. He and his friends would pitch tents in their front yard and camp out all night, and the neighborhood children would congregate at the Primo's house. Ralph said they were the first Mexican family in their neighborhood, and that this neighborhood was a melting pot of races. Their son said he had friends of all races and they had a great time playing and riding their bikes. Activities revolved around Mar Vista Park where Ralph Sr. coached Little League. He was also the scoutmaster for the Westdale Scout Troop. Celia also had many interests besides working in their businesses. She was involved in the PTA and she worked as an interpreter at UCLA, among other activities.

An interesting fact: in the early 1960s, the Primo's joined in with four neighborhood families in a successful lawsuit against the City of Santa Monica because of the airport. It was later overturned. When asked about other changes in our neighborhood, Ralph said he really misses a large local student enrollment at Richland and Daniel Webster Middle School. He also finds, like many of us, the speeding, cut-through traffic and drivers going through stop signs in our neighborhood to be an irritant.

Ralph has been an active businessman, at one time in real estate investment properties, a restaurateur, and a stock broker. He and Celia are proud of their successful children and their life in this community.

The Primos describe their life here as establishing the American Dream.



Celia and Ralph Primo

Photo by Martin Rubin