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Unfolding the History of Parkview Pharmacy

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By

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To: Mr. Smith

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During my elementary years, my teachers taught me about the importance of certain monuments and buildings to our country. They never made me look at my own community and how it also has important places within it. It is very interesting to know that our own communities have not always looked or been the same as we see them today. For this project, I could have chosen to look up the history of a famous monument and its importance to California or to the United States, but I didn't. I chose to do the history on an ordinary place with its own history in its community and which I can connect to because it's part of the neighborhood I was raised in. Doing the history of a place I personally can relate to is more important to me than doing it on a famous monument where I can only discover its history through books or through what my teachers have told me. I was able to find out about Parkview Pharmacy through first hand information - its owners, Mr. Smith and Mr. Lewis.

Parkview Pharmacy, located on 95th Street and Main, has been in the neighborhood for thirty-two years. It is an antique neighborhood pharmacy where you can find a little bit of everything; from personal hygiene items, cosmetics, candy, school supplies, pet supplies, perfume, over the counter medication and even cigarettes and beer. The pharmacy is not very large, but Mr. Smith and Mr. Lewis try to keep what customers ask for. There are only two cash registers; one in the front for any items and another in the back for prescription items. The pharmacy has different types of customers and a close tie exist between them and the pharmacist because they (pharmacist) take time to help those with any questions. There are customers that have been with them since the store opened and even before they opened their own business. Some of these special customers are Mrs. Alfred Smith, Florence, Mr. Mejia, who used to live in what was known as Chavez Ravine, and

many others too numerous to name, but who have also been part of Parkview Pharmacy.

Mr. Smith and Mr. Lewis are two of the brightest men I've ever met and who were able to get a higher education despite the obstacles they faced, racism for example. Mr. Lewis was born and raised in Alabama and started working at a very young age in drugstores. These drugstores were white owned in black neighborhoods. While he was in junior high, his job was to dust and make deliveries to customers on his bicycle. When he got to high school he began to fill up the prescriptions. In 1957, he received his B.S. from Xavier University in Louisiana. In that same year he came to California because pharmacist got paid better and he had^{to} take California's state board examination in order to get his license and practice in the state. When he had his license he began working in Thrifty's Drugstores: 5th & Hill Street, Vernon & Central which got burnt during the Watts Riots along with his original license and a collection of stories he was writing along with a co-worker about their experience with customers. After the riots in 1965, he worked at the Thrifty's on Figueroa & Vernon where he met Hudson Smith. Mr. Smith was born and raised in South Central L.A. He attended 96th Street School, Gomper's Junior High, Fremont High School, and in 1965 he received his Pharm-D from U.S.C. The fact that Mr. Smith was raised in the neighborhood makes it easier for him to relate with the customers. He has seen the changes and knows how hard it is for his people to reach their dreams, therefore, he tries to help those who come to him.

Mr. Lewis and Mr. Smith hadn't known each other long when they formed a close friendship and decided to open a pharmacy of their own and become partners. "We had done a lot for Thrifty's we thought we could do it for ourselves" (Mr. Lewis). On July 1966, the two partners opened their own

pharmacy on 74th & Western and named it "Parkview Pharmacy." "First we thought naming the place L&S, after our initials, but then we just came up with Parkview Pharmacy and we liked that name. We told the customers we had that we were going to open our pharmacy. They liked the way we waited on them and they did follow us to our pharmacy" (Mr. Smith). They didn't have much money so they opened with only 100 prescription items; "the most popular at the time" (Mr. Lewis).

While Mr. Lewis and Mr. Smith were getting their business started, there was another pharmacy on 95th & Main, Don's Pharmacy, going out of business. Don Hoonanian, an Armenian, had been the second owner of this pharmacy, but his business wasn't going too well. "They had no set schedule. After the Watts Riots they began closing at 1:00 or 2:00" (Mr. Smith). Don and his wife lived next to Parkview Pharmacy and one day Mrs. Hoonanian went into Parkview and told Mr. Smith that they were selling their business and asked him if they might be interested in buying it (Mr. Smith).

On November 1966, Mr. Lewis and Mr. Smith bought the business from Hoonanian and rented the building (they bought the building four months later). Now, there were two Parkview Pharmacy Drugstores. Mr. Lewis would work one day at 74th & Western while Mr. Smith was at 95th & Main and the next day they would change pharmacies. On December 1966, they closed the Parview Pharmacy on 74th & Western because their lease had ran out (Mr. Smith).

The pharmacy left became a special neighborhood pharmacy throughout the years. The building was built in 1932 and owned by Armenians. It was 22x75ft and had a house behind it as part of it's property where Dorothy, an African American woman was living at the time Mr. Lewis and Mr. Smith bought the business. Her sister, Florence was working for Don's Pharmacy.

The building itself has not gone through much change from the outside or inside since it was built. As I mentioned before, it looks very antique. As I was looking at the building from outside, Solomon Cannon, a customer who's also been around for a while asked me to find out who the original owners were because there's a swastika within the bricks, on the wall. "Cops pass by at night and look at it" (Solomon). There are some customers who have also asked me about it, but I never knew where it was until Solomon brought to my attention and I found it very interesting to know if it was a swastika or not. Mr. Lewis said it was built within the wall as a sign of "good luck." He looked it up for me to show me the difference between the symbol on the wall and the German swastika. It is a swastika, but not the Nazi symbol. It is a symbol used by the American Indians particularly the Navahos and its end are facing a little differently than the German swastika. If it was a Nazi swastika, it would have been removed during WWII. Another interesting thing I found out was that there use to be a soda fountain in the pharmacy during the time that Don was the owner. There are still two holes on the ceiling that were placed there to let the smoke out. "All drugstores had a soda fountain. It was a small lunch room for people to come. It was removed before we got here" (Mr. Lewis).

Business was going good and they wanted to add more merchandise so on October 1967 Parkview was enlarged. The house behind the pharmacy was knocked down and Mr. Smith's father who was a construction worker began to construct the rest of the pharmacy from east to west. "The pharmacy was accessible for a while so someone had to stay until the walls were put up" (Mr. Lewis). The prescriptions were filled in this new section and items were ordered to fill up the empty space. The pharmacy went from 22x75ft to 40x100ft.

In 1976 the two pharmacist had a friend paint a mural on the wall with

great African American Achievers. Included in this painting are Charles Drew, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, George Washington Carver, and the Virgin Mary of Guadalupe. "This painting would give pride of our past achievements. The Virgin Mary was placed there to let Spanish people know they were welcome here" (Mr. Smith).

Before the Los Angeles Riots, the pharmacy did not have security windows. When the pharmacy was closed everything could be seen from the outside through the windows. Mr. Lewis told me that for him this was the way an old time drugstore looked like. Even if everything could be seen, they never had any serious problems with robberies. "The only drawback of having the windows like that was that once we were closed people could still see us and knock on it for us to let them in"(Mr. Lewis)!

As a neighborhood pharmacy, Parkview has always tried keeping in stock what their customers ask for. It has two reputations. First, it is known for having the coldest beer in town and then for carrying the "old remedies" such as milk of asafetida, Lydia Pinkham, Alum powder, Camphor Block, Turpentine, Rock Candy, Hore Hound Candy, and Cat Knip Tea. These items are hard to find today. Mr. Smith and Mr. Lewis have carried these items because most of their customers were/are from the South. They brought their merchandise with them and some were left by Don (Mr. Lewis). Older customers come in all the time and ask for these things and I hear them say, "You can't find it anywhere else. I knew you guys would have it." The pharmacy has to send off for these items in other states. It feels nice to know that the pharmacy has a reputation for carrying these scarce items.

There are some customers that go in the pharmacy looking for an ATM machine since they are used to using them in just about every store now. Parkview Pharmacy has chosen not to have one simply because of the location.

Mr. Lewis believes that it's too dangerous to have one in the store and that it can cause hold ups. I agree with him! All the pharmacies that I've been to use computers to make up the prescription labels, to look up customers names for refills, and to do second party prescription. I believe Parkview Pharmacy has the oldest typewriter in the world! The pharmacists have chosen to continue using their typewriter to type up the labels. "Computers make the work lighter for those pharmacies that do second party prescription" (Mr. Lewis). They only take cash and depending on the amount of customers waiting, their medicine is usually ready in five to fifteen minutes plus Mr. Smith and Mr. Lewis still take time to give the customers the instructions on how to take their medication. Not having an ATM machine nor a computer add to the antiquity of the pharmacy.

When Lewis and Smith first started they worked on their own. When business began to pick up, their wives would come and help. After some time, these women had their own things to do so Mr. Lewis hired Corrine Jones, whom he had worked with in a pharmacy on 107th & Avalon. She was their first employee and worked for them for almost 20 years. There are businesses that do not hire employees from the same family, but MR. Smith and Mr. Lewis have only hired family or someone who they know or is known by one of the employees. Most places also prefer to hire people with experience. "How can you get experience without experience. We purposely tend to pick employees with no experience so that we may train them how we want" (Mr. Lewis). What they train their employees to do is to be very respectful and courteous with the customers and it is learned simply by following Mr. Lewis and Mr. Smith's manners because they are very respectful with all the customers. Another special quality that these two men have is that they are very understanding towards their employees that are in school; most businesses are not. "School

is important above work. We work out schedule conflicts between school and work. I can say that about 90% of our employees have gone to college because we encourage them to go and also perhaps because of what they see from the customers here. Some have good professions and others have gone in a bad direction" (Mr. Lewis).

Anita Lewis is another employee who has been with Parkview Pharmacy for 30 years. She is presently the manager and has known Mr. Smith for many years (since they were children). Her sister, Bernice Hitchens has been working here for 24 years. These two woman hold a very good relationship with all the customers. People come in all the time asking for "one of the sisters or one of the twins." They deal with different kinds of customers- nice, mean, educated, and rude, but they are always polite with everyone. Because they have been part of the community for a long time, there are customers that come in to talk to them about their problems. They also try to help those that are in need of money. "I have seen many children grow up in a bad environment and grow up pretty good. We've also tried to help others who are headed in the wrong direction, but some are now dead or in jail, others are doing good and come back to see us" (Bernice). Mr. Smith, Mr. Lewis, Anita, and Bernice have all tried helping some of the children that come in, to aspire higher goals. Mr. Smith used to let the children around the pharmacy clean up outside in the afternoon and pay them \$2/\$4 each, simply because he wanted to teach these children that in order to earn money you have to work hard for it. These children took this job seriously and were all ready at the time he would tell them to come, trying to be the first ones there because he would only let three work. With the money he would give them, these children would buy candies or even save it. These children weren't the type whose parents had a lot of money, therefore, having at least

\$2/\$4 wouldn't give them the temptation to steal. These children are now grown up and come back to say hello to Mr. Smith. I think this is one of their greatest pleasures, watching all these children grow up through the years that they have been here.

As the years have gone by, the crew from Parkview Pharmacy has seen different changes occurring. When the store first opened there were older white people and African Americans. Presently, there are only African Americans and Latinos. There is a motel across the street where mostly drug addicts hang around and Anita tells me that this motel was once apartments where older white people lived. In 1965, the Head Start Program began in the United States and the pharmacy had the wonderful opportunity of watching a Head Start being built across the street in 1968 and enjoying the company of the children when they were dismissed.

The welfare cuts that have been made these past years have affected the pharmacy. The store was always busy especially on the first and fifteenth of the month. These were the days when more children would go to the pharmacy to buy candy or chips. After the families started receiving less money and only once a month, business became slow. People have to manage their money more carefully because they can't afford to buy the amount of items they used to buy before. Parkview Pharmacy also accepted medical at one time, but discontinued their contract with the state because they weren't getting paid. The state still owes the pharmacy about \$4,000. Many people are on medi-cal and I believe this affects the pharmacy because they no longer have a contract with the state.

The safety of the neighborhood has also changed through the years. "Everyone knew each other when we first opened. We didn't have any security mirrors, camera , nor a security guard" (Mr. Lewis). The pharmacy used to

make deliveries to customers, but as time passed the neighborhood became a little dangerous so they had to stop delivering. Security mirrors were placed after they kept finding empty boxes. In 1992, after the first serious robbery, surveillance cameras were placed and a security guard was brought in. Anita describes the old thieves as not as mean as they are today: "These new ones try to torture you!"

During the L.A. Riots in 1992, the importance of this pharmacy in the community was expressed by its customers. Broadway, which is a block away from the pharmacy was a busy street with stores that had been around for some time. A few yards away from the pharmacy was "Frank and Thelma's, a little neighborhood market owned by Japanese who had also been in that same location for a long time. These places were looted and burnt. After the flames had been put out, Parkview Pharmacy was still standing... untouched. Mr. Smith said that strangers tried getting near the building to loot and burn it, but customers stood in front of them and said, "You're not going to touch this place." They didn't. This place was not important to those who intended to destroy it, but it was important to those who grew around the pharmacy and respected Mr. Smith and Mr. Lewis. On this day, when people were afraid just to see the red sky, proud customers stood next to the pharmacy to show how special it was to them.

As a child, I would go to Parkview Pharmacy with my mom to buy medicine. I, along with my two older sisters attended the Head Start on 95th & Main and were part of those children that Mr. Smith, Mr. Lewis, Anita, and Bernice saw grow up. From 1986-1991, my sister Norma worked for Parkview. From 1991-1996, my sister Diana was there and from 1993-present, I have had the pleasure of working for these two great pharmacist. I will only be with them one more year until I start my student teaching. Parkview Pharmacy has been part of

me and my family as well, and this is why I decided to find out about its history. In a year from now, I will be part of its history!!!