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When Club Oasis went down, it took the West Side's hard-earned trust with it

By Mandy Oaklander

published: January 20, 2011

Damarak the Destroyer



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Monitor Place, a hilly street just west of Interstate 35, was the first street on Kansas City's West Side

where landlords would rent to Hispanics. Many of the red-brick duplexes in this once-proud Irish neighborhood now wave Mexican flags alongside American ones.

A block south of Monitor is Southwest Boulevard, the neighborhood's main thoroughfare, lined with sweet-smelling *panaderias* and *taquerias*. Drive west on the boulevard, past the tortilla factories and Boulevard Brewery, and you hit Autobuses Los Paisanos, a run-down bus depot where passengers can catch buses from Kansas City to Chihuahua, Mexico, for \$139.

And just down the block from there, for *paisanos* wanting Mexico without the bus ticket, there was always Club Oasis.

Until its recent demise, Oasis — which opened in 1999 — was the West Side's best cure for Mexican homesickness. Every Sunday night, throngs of mustachioed men in cream-colored cowboy hats drank and danced with stilettoed women until closing time at 3 a.m., when the party poured into the street. On those infamous Sunday nights, cops who patrolled the West Side knew they'd be stationed at or near Oasis — especially in the club's last two years, when they were called to it 160 times.

But on October 24 of last year, the party abruptly ended. Kansas City police officers barreled through the doors, turning the place to chaos. The lights came on, and the music cut out.

Cocaine and meth were hurled to the floor like a freak hailstorm, police later reported. Guns were unholstered and scattered across the room. Fake IDs were shoved into potted plants.

It looked at first like a standard "tavern check," during which police look for for underage drinkers and other violations. But for most of the clubbers there that night, what really troubled them was the team that came in behind the police: as many as 15 agents from U.S. Immigration and Customs

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For those clubgoers who lived nearby, the presence of ICE broke a long-standing treaty between local police and illegal immigrants. The cops who worked the West Side ignored citizenship status altogether, repeatedly vowing to address more pressing problems: gangs, drugs, violence.

But once the ICE agents showed up, everyone knew exactly what was about to happen. When it came to the word *immigration*, everyone at Oasis was bilingual.

As the manager of Regulated Industries, the agency that monitors Kansas City's 1,100 liquor licenses, Gary Majors maintains files for every bar and club in the city. Most bars' histories are summed up in thin manila folders. But Club Oasis has accumulated its own accordion portfolio stuffed with two fat binders. Flipping through them, you can practically smell the pepper spray and gun smoke.

On a Sunday in March 2009, one report shows, a security guard threw a belligerent man out of the club. The man returned in a pickup a few minutes later, veering onto the sidewalk where the security guard stood post. The driver rammed into the front gate of the club as the guard jumped out of the way.

Four months later, three people were shot outside the club, according to another police report. One of the victims, who was leaving the club at the time, said he saw a man point a black revolver out the window of a moving vehicle and fire three shots toward the club.

In November 2009, a police officer drove past Club Oasis to find a crowd of 20 people fighting in the middle of Southwest Boulevard. The officer told the security guard that if Oasis couldn't keep its patrons in check, police would close the club. The guard said he wished the cops would; the crowd, he admitted, was beyond his control. Just then, a man started swinging his crutches at two others near the entrance. The police officer struggled to arrest the patrons, and the security guard didn't make it any easier: He pepper-sprayed everyone, including the officer, and walked back inside the club.

The club only enhanced its reputation for mayhem in 2010. Early in the year, a woman selling food from a mobile *taqueria* was shot twice in the stomach, *The Kansas City Star* reported, and a man was shot in the knee and foot. (Both survived.) In October, two weeks before the immigration raid, five people were robbed at gunpoint in a parking lot close to the club, police say, and off-duty cops were involved in a rolling gun battle.

Majors arrived at Regulated Industries only three years ago, but reports like these have plagued his Monday mornings since the early 2000s. Before this job, Majors spent 28 years as commander of the Central Patrol Division, which patrols Oasis' neighborhood.

"When I was the commander of the police station, I used to ask myself, 'Why can't the city ... take their liquor license away?'" Majors says. "Now I'm on this side of the coin, and I'm sure the police are still saying the same thing."

After the raid, Majors added the latest police reports to Oasis' file. The cops wrangled a decent bounty that night, arresting several minors and armed, unlicensed security guards — one with cocaine in his pocket. They even recouped a metal detector stolen from the Kansas City, Missouri, School District. The violations prompted Majors to call a meeting with the club's owner, Arturo Romo Jr.

Romo is no stranger to Regulated Industries. He and his brother opened Taqueria Mexico on Southwest Boulevard in 1994. That mushroomed into three restaurants, a tortilla factory, a nightclub called Casa Grande, and Club Oasis. Last year, Casa Grande received a violation for serving alcohol to a minor. Taqueria Mexico on Independence Avenue got one in 2009 and one in 2010.

But Majors sounds almost paternal when he discusses local businesses, like they're children he has vowed to love equally. That includes Oasis.

"I like to think of myself as an eternal optimist," he says. "With Club Oasis, I just don't know yet. I like to think we could turn them around."

So despite Oasis' years of havoc wreaking, Majors offered Romo a choice: Take a three-day suspension or let the liquor board decide the club's fate. Romo opted for the suspension.

He reopened the club the following weekend under a new name, as if trying to baptize it clean of its sinful past. But the presence of ICE agents that night ensured that Oasis would struggle to survive. And according to some West Side stakeholders, it wasn't the only business to take a hit.

A few blocks north of Club Oasis is the Westside Community Action Network Center, a neighborhood hub that started as a place for men to piss. Back in the early 1990s, hundreds of day laborers would stand for hours at the corner of Summit and Southwest Boulevard, waiting for a truck to stop by with work. The men were known to urinate and defecate in public and even shower in neighbors' yards.

Around that time, the community-center concept — in which local agencies work together to reduce crime in certain neighborhoods — was taking hold around the country. Each CAN Center had police officers and a codes inspector who worked to minimize blight and the crime that came with it.

The concept landed in Kansas City in 1994, when the Kansas City Chamber of Commerce opened a CAN Center near the day laborers' pickup spot. One of the first things the center did was offer the men a toilet. Since then, the center has survived on meager grants and donations.

The center remains a place for day laborers to wait for work. The warehouselike space is equipped with a stove, a shower, bathrooms, lockers, a washer and a dryer, and a coffee machine. Most days, workers bring food to share — tortillas, avocados and green beans, all piled into cardboard boxes. While they wait for work, the men sit around a table playing games, the sound of slamming dominoes popping in the air like the crackle of a fire.

A sprawling window connects the day laborers' living room to the office of the two Kansas City policemen who work out of the CAN Center, Matt Tomasic and Octavio "Chato" Villalobos. A portrait of Emiliano Zapata, leader of the Mexican Revolution, hangs on the cops' ever-open door.

Villalobos, 38, is tall and husky with a heavy brow and warm, dark eyes. He grew up on the West Side in the 1980s and remembers how he feared the cops long before he became one.

"When I was growing up, you were scared of the police officers," he says on a recent afternoon in his office. "There was a sense that officers despised people in this community because we had the projects, we had people with lower incomes and immigrant families."

Villalobos has been stationed at the CAN Center for almost five years. Every morning, around 6 a.m., he and Tomasic drive up and down the neighborhood in an unmarked vehicle — one the whole neighborhood recognizes — to check for broken windows and busted locks. On cold days, they patrol school-bus stops and give coats to kids who need them. They meet with West Side merchants to hear how business is. Then it's back to the center, where they monitor and talk to the day laborers. Afternoon programs at the center include STD testing, meetings for addicts, and flu-shot administration.

Across the communal space, just past a shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe, is the cramped office of CAN

Executive Director Lynda Callon. Cardboard boxes, filled with anything that could prove useful to someone in need, litter the nearly impenetrable room. Plastic grocery bags packed with clothes and condoms decorate the office like throw pillows. A 50-pound sack of flour, to one day be used to make tortillas, sags lifelessly against her desk. A cactus piñata waits in the corner for the birthday of a neighborhood kid.

Along with a steering committee made up of people from the neighborhood (including Oasis owner Romo), Callon has been running the center full time for more than a decade. She makes \$15,000 a year.

"In the beginning, the neighborhood wanted the CAN Center, but they didn't want the police officers," she says. "It was really hard to get them to call the police, period."

But in policing the neighborhood and running the center, Callon and the officers have consciously ignored immigration status. Over time, they say, West Side immigrants slowly offered their trust in exchange.

"Eventually, the neighbors would tell me things ... and we would be able to pass that information on to the police officers," Callon says of CAN's first years.

And after a while, she says, residents began to take their issues directly to the cops. The more time the cops spent there, the more information they gathered — at least until October 24.

On the dance floor that night, ICE officials shouted orders in Spanish for everyone to separate: people with papers on one side of the room, people without them on the other.

One by one, ICE escorted each person to a van parked outside to be fingerprinted, says immigration attorney Angela Ferguson, whose clients include people who were at the club that night. After pressing their fingers into the fingerprint reader, one of two lights illuminated. A red light indicated that the person had a criminal record, prior deportations or warrants, or that they had missed an immigration-court hearing. ICE apprehended those people on the spot, taking away 20 Mexican and Guatemalan immigrants, ICE spokeswoman Gail Montenegro tells *The Pitch*. They all face deportation.

A green light meant no rap sheet. Those people — ICE won't say how many; Ferguson estimates about 200 — were given appointment notices to report to ICE.

The notices were voluntary invitations to turn themselves in to immigration, Ferguson says. But only those with lawyers would know that they had a choice to report. About 60 showed, she says. According to Montenegro, whoever appeared also now faces deportation.

After the raid, questions arose about whether it was designed to undermine Kansas City Police Chief Jim Corwin, who has always maintained that immigration enforcement has no place in local police work.

In the past, "KCPD used the excuse that these people are undocumented and should be deported and ... the whole community suffered," Corwin once wrote in *The Police Chief* magazine. Documented or undocumented, he wrote, anyone who obeyed the law was part of the community.

Such a severe break with Corwin's philosophy would seem to warrant the chief's OK, especially given that it involved such a polarizing issue. But Corwin didn't know about the raid. He wasn't even in town that night. He was in Florida for the International Association of Chiefs of Police conference, where he was being honored for his community policing on the West Side. Villalobos and Tomasic were there with him.

Maj. Wayne Stewart, the commander of Central Patrol Division, denies that the raid was timed to coincide with Corwin's absence. The bust had been in the works for more than a year, he says, and he enlisted the help of Maj. Jan Zimmerman, commander of the Narcotics and Vice Division. Zimmerman works with a local gang task force, and that task force happens to include ICE agents.

"Oasis is really no different than all types of other big operations that we plan all the time," she says. "And when someone volunteers manpower, I don't turn it down."

Zimmerman planned the raid and sent Stewart an e-mail, telling his officers when to show up. She claims that she didn't know the club would be filled with undocumented immigrants — it was hardly a secret, though, and ICE's desire to tag along should have tipped her off. She also denies that she brought along ICE for that reason.

"You could write the same story: 'Golly, why would you take the gun people to a club that's primarily African-American? What's the message there?'" she asks. "There's no message."

The message seems obvious, actually: A club full of illegal immigrants was causing problems, so they decided to take down the club and take the undocumented immigrants with it. Still, she and Stewart seem to harbor second thoughts about how the raid unfolded.

"Our missions were not in-sync that night," Stewart says. "ICE didn't do anything wrong. They did what ICE does, and we did what we do. But they are not compatible in that environment."

"I'm certainly not going to stand in the way of a federal agency there to execute their mission," Zimmerman adds, but then wonders aloud: "What's our latitude for just following the police mission and not going on divergent paths?"

The uneven brick building at 2805 Southwest Boulevard still looks like an unfinished game of Tetris, but it has been slapped with a fresh Smurf-blue paint job and a new, cheery name: Copa Cabana. An oversized martini glass has replaced the Oasis palm tree.

When I arrive on a recent Sunday night, a woman administers a perfunctory pat-down next to a metal detector. The bar is loud, but only about 20 bodies are there to soak up the music.

Noticing the out-of-place *gringo*, a short man with a jet-black mustache summons me for a drink. He introduces himself as Georgy.

"You hang with us," Georgy says. "I can get you whatever you want." I hope this means he can connect me with Romo, who refused to speak with me directly about his club. But Georgy has different connections in mind.

He opens his right hand to reveal a small white package of cocaine. "Want some?" he asks.

I politely decline. Georgy turns on me. "What are you doing here?" he asks. "You need to go. You don't belong here. Look around you."

Georgy curls his hand into the shape of a gun and whispers in my ear: "I'm telling you for your own safety — get out."

I oblige, having seen enough of Oasis' new incarnation: a lifeless nightclub good for little more than an easy coke score. However they did it, the police succeeded in doing what Majors wouldn't: decimating

the club's status as the neighborhood hot spot. The last crowd to rush through Oasis' doors were all wearing badges.

"The business has just cut back to nothing," says Richard Bryant, Romo's lawyer. He says Romo is considering selling the club.

This is good news on the West Side, where many people are relieved to see that Oasis has effectively been shut down. But some maintain that police, or even Majors, could have closed the club on their own and identified the illegal immigrants with criminal pasts or outstanding warrants. It didn't require ICE, they say. But because ICE came, the death knell that was meant only for Oasis now reverberates throughout the West Side.

Just east of Oasis on Southwest Boulevard is El Pueblito restaurant, its name in neon letters the colors of the Mexican flag. Before the raid, the late-night restaurant was often 15 tables deep in customers, especially on Sundays. Now, manager Nephi Mendez says the best he can hope for is a few scattered patrons.

"I've had a lot of customers text and call me, asking me if they're going down to all the restaurants now, checking about immigration," Mendez says, leaning over the bar in the restaurant. "They call it 'hot out' — the cops are watching ... I don't sell the volume I used to."

Callon, the CAN executive director, says the center suffered after the raid. For about a month, immigrants who needed services were slow to return to the center. Once they did, they came when the officers weren't around.

"All this does is verify to them that the police can't be trusted and the police may not have your best interest at heart," Callon says. "It's re-creating the very situation they left in their countries: Police were the bad guys, did the shakedown, were the crooks. ... A lot of folks who wanted to be forthcoming with information decided that they could not risk now talking to the police."

"It was a mistake," Callon continues, referring to the raid. "They could have come up with the same results another way that would not have traumatized a whole demographic."

Gilbert Guerrero, who runs the West Side's Alta Vista charter schools, agrees. Now 50, he has lived in this neighborhood for almost three decades. He taught Chato Villalobos, the CAN officer, at Westport High School.

Last year, Guerrero and Villalobos organized an event for police officers at Alta Vista. Without telling the kids that they were cops, the officers spent a week tutoring and talking with students. At the end of the week, the men revealed that they were police officers. The experiment was win-win, Guerrero says: The officers learned about the neighborhood kids, and the kids learned that they shouldn't be afraid of cops.

Now, because some of his students are undocumented, Guerrero won't risk continuing the program.

"I trust Chato so much that I know he wouldn't bring anyone in here to harm my kids," Guerrero says, sitting cross-legged on a divan in the school's lobby. "But after that raid, I don't know if I would allow any police officers in that program to come and interact with my kids."

Guerrero credits Villalobos and Tomasic with gaining fragments of trust from the neighborhood — and he blames the Oasis raid for smashing them to pieces.

"I don't know how that comes back," he says, shaking his head. "It's almost like Chato and Matt have to

start all over."