



The need to succeed

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If Irvine were human, that person would be ambitious, overachieving youngster who calmly, diligently and enviably appears to accomplish anything he or she sets out to do.

Irvine residents pursue success and stability in the self-proclaimed "City of Innovation," where everyone, it seems, is striving.

But where does that drive come from? And why is it so pervasive?

People come for the stellar schools, safe neighborhoods and major companies headquartered here. They bring a level of hope and motivation that has made success almost inevitable.

And so, the list of laurels grows ever longer as Irvine attracts and perpetuates a culture of achievement that is woven into the very founding fabric of the city.

O PIONEERS (a reference to a Walt Whitman poem celebrating westward expansion)

Irvine, visionary architect William Pereira predicted, would be an ideal city where the basic building blocks of success would be installed into the earth before the first residents even arrived.

The routines of life would arise from the city's layout itself, complete with an urban core, abundant open space, affordable housing for all and a thriving university fueling the intellectual and business heart of the city.

As the dream went up in scaffolding, each minute detail was carefully chosen under the eagle eye of The Irvine Company's Donald Bren: the Mediterranean style, the width of the medians, the red-tiled roofs, even the variety of palm tree and the height of the electrical sockets at the Irvine Hilton.

School district boundaries mirrored those of the city. Low-income housing was built into the plans for future villages. Neither the rich nor the poor would be isolated. The idea was that if the city were truly integrated, anyone could succeed.

That discipline for which Irvine sometimes is mocked – the beige paint, the homogenous lack of civic personality – nonetheless has helped catapult the city into the upper echelons of nearly every desirable ranking. Irvine has claimed them all: best-run city, most business-friendly city, safest city, greenest city, most bike-friendly city, best schools, happiest young professionals, best place to live.

What emerged from those early designs was a premeditated version of prosperity – the theory that plans beget order, and order begets success, and successful people are drawn to successful places.

What attracted new residents was the very American sense of striking out on a new frontier, of unbridled possibility no matter your background, so that when you bought a home in Irvine, you were buying into the whole ethos of the city.

PLANNING PAYS OFF

Today's Irvine is one of the most highly acclaimed cities in Orange County, a product of the search for success that became, if not the residents' reality, then the guiding mentality.

Maintaining that mentality is the result of two major efforts: attracting the best and raising the best.

Giants in a wide spectrum of fields – Broadcom, Vizio, Blizzard, Allergen, In-N-Out, Edwards Lifesciences and

Kia Motors America – make their home here. The ample office space and amenities of the Irvine Business Complex offer a multiuse world unto itself. The city’s business-friendly initiatives have slashed or deferred fees, streamlined companies’ interactions with the city and provided workshops and mentoring for businesses.

Irvine had 10 times more white-collar jobs than the regional average in 2009, eight times the blue-collar jobs and five times the retail jobs, according to the Southern California Regional Progress Report compiled by the UC Irvine social ecology department.

The city government has tried to work smarter and more efficiently, with employees forgoing pay raises for five years to weather the economic recession, doing more work and bringing home less pay as the cost of living rose.

And safety, which the city touts often, is one of the main draws. All this bustling industriousness is made possible in a place that for nine straight years has reported the lowest violent crime rate of cities with at least 100,000 people.

But success, as any sector of the City of Innovation knows, isn’t just a straight-line journey from point A to B. True success stems from the mindset that better is always just around the corner.

STAYING HUNGRY

Appetite is the gift of the young – the ability to take risks and swallow any failures, metabolizing them into energy and motivation for better uses.

The youth of this young city are doubly blessed to take advantage of Irvine’s decentralized school district that allows each school to take its own risks – and regularly ranks among the highest in the county and the state.

Families move to Irvine for the storied schools, hoping their children can be raised on a steady diet of ambition and academic excellence.

Standardized test scores exceed county and national averages, while students’ resumes are brimming with Advanced Placement classes, college courses and extracurriculars.

Seven new schools will open their doors by the start of the 2020 school year. A city plan to help keep kids out of trouble was extended five more years. Residents overwhelmingly passed Measure BB last year, providing \$2 million more per year to Irvine’s schools.

But any educator will tell you that it’s not really about the numbers.

For Irvine teachers, success means protecting kids’ innate hunger for learning and creativity. And that means being creative themselves.

“I’m OK as an artist – I can teach the kids art,” said Scott Bedley, a fifth-grade teacher at Plaza Vista School and an Orange County Teacher of the Year. “But why not Skype someone in from Brooklyn who’s a professional artist who can really inspire the kids in a way that a working artist can?”

If teachers can think outside the box, then their students will, too. When they’re adults and pursuing careers, the theory goes, success will be measured not by numbers but by innovation.

But the pressure is immense for students as college looms closer. Faced with the daunting task of becoming Renaissance men and women, students strive to excel in every class, club and sport and seem to take it all in stride.

At ultra-competitive University High School, where the goal is admission to an excellent college, the student body is polarized between those who pursue a slew of APs and those who follow the regular curriculum, students say.

Some overachieving students are trying to outdo each other, with their self-esteem measured by their grade point average. Others say they have to uphold the schools’ reputation and, subsequently, their own. Some simply are that passionate about their studies, making others feel as though they’re not doing enough.

And for those who just want to belong, fitting in means that they have to do everything, too. Although the rigorous curriculum isn’t for everyone, some forward-thinking students view it as a stepping stone, a tool for greater things to come.

"It's very easy to get stuck in the way that Uni teaches," said Kevin Lee, 16, a senior at University High School. "But if you have the vision to see past where the class goes, and you see down the road where you want to go ... you can use the education of the school toward what you want it to be."

As with all grand plans, a perfect reality in Irvine doesn't exist. Property crime tipped up slightly last year, 11 percent of residents live below the poverty line, and not all students make it into their dream college.

Irvine is not a utopia but clearly propelled by an insatiable need to succeed.

Maybe it's the idealism and gusto of youth – the promise of plots of land not yet built and dreams not yet realized. But Irvine, having achieved that success, isn't about to let it go.

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