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Walton family bequeaths property to nonprofit for binational outreach

By Mia Taylor
UNION-TRIBUNE

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NATIONAL CITY – A small sign hanging on a nail in the kitchen proclaims “Gone to Wal-Mart.”

A faded color photograph in the dining room shows young Lucas Walton, grandson of Wal-Mart founder Sam Walton, grinning and proudly toting a cardboard box overflowing with blue and white “Sam’s Club” placards.

In a corner of the backyard, a tiny set of handprints has been preserved in cement, next to the scrawled initials “L.W.” and the date “1987.”

These are just some of the personal touches left behind at 2525 N Ave., which from 1986 to 2005 was home to Wal-Mart heir John Walton, his wife, Christy, and their son, Lucas. The family moved to Jackson Hole, Wyo., and used their property in National City as a second home.

At the end of an unassuming street lined by modest single-story homes, the



NELVIN C. CEPEDA / Union-Tribune

The Walton house in National City will be opening to the public for the first time since the heirs to the Wal-Mart fortune gifted the home in 2006 to the International Community Foundation, which plans to move in in April.

At the end of an unassuming street lined by modest single-story homes, the

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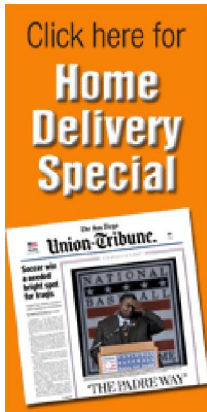
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4,000-square-foot Victorian home and its nearly 7 acres of manicured grounds seem as out of place as its billionaire owners once must have been.

As the son of Wal-Mart founder Sam Walton, John Walton and his family could have lived anywhere. When he died in 2005 at age 58, John Walton was ranked by *Forbes* magazine as No. 11 on a list of the world's richest individuals. But when he and wife Christy bought the N Avenue property – in a city where the median annual income hovers around \$30,000, according to the 2000 U.S. Census – one of the couple's goals was to provide their son with as normal a childhood as possible. Lucas, now in his early 20s, attended the now-defunct Harborside School in downtown San Diego.

“Christy had a real desire to give her child an opportunity to live in a typical American community, an experience you're not going to get in a Rancho Santa Fe,” said Richard Kiy, president of the San Diego County-based International Community Foundation, and a friend of Christy Walton's.



NELVIN C. CEPEDA / Union-Tribune
 Master gardener Martha Prusinskas picked carrots from the home's organic garden. The five-bedroom Victorian on N Avenue in National City was built in 1896.

In 2006, the Waltons bequeathed the property to the foundation, a nonprofit that encourages charitable giving and volunteerism in Baja California and other areas in Mexico.

This past October, at the foundation's request, the National City City Council voted to rezone the property for institutional use, allowing the house and the land to be used as the site of the foundation's newly incorporated Center for Cross Border Philanthropy.

The center's mission will be promoting binational programs and outreach. As part of that mission, the property will be used for small meetings and conferences between leaders from public, private and nonprofit agencies in the United States and Mexico.

Kiy also envisions making the property available for cultural interpretation and historical programs for students. The National City Historical Society will hold a tea there tomorrow.

The foundation plans to move in in April.

Historic property

The house has a long and colorful history dating back to the late 1800s and including the city's high society and founding fathers. The fact that heirs to the Wal-Mart fortune lived at 2525 N Ave. is merely the most recent chapter in the story of the historic home.

In his hometown of Henniker, N.H., Oliver Noyes was a wealthy businessman who owned a block of stores.

In the early 1890s, encouraged by friends who also happened to be National City's founding fathers – the Kimballs – Noyes came west.

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 the magic of

In 1893, Noyes was named the National City's postmaster. He built the five-bedroom home on N Avenue in 1896.

It's one of the region's finest examples of a Queen Anne Victorian. Such homes are marked by intricately carved woodwork and trim on the exterior, built-in cabinetry on the interior, many small rooms and pastel colors, said Janice Martinelli, president of the National City Historical Society.

"It was a very social era. They liked to entertain," Martinelli said. "So having a lot of rooms was important."

The Noyes' home was no exception.

On the first floor, the largest room is a parlor that was likely used for entertaining and social gatherings. There's also a series of smaller rooms including an elegant room adjacent to the front door, with an ornate tile fireplace, that would have been used either as a study or waiting room.

The home remained in the Noyes family for several decades after Oliver Noyes passed away. In 1947, Esther and Bud Newlan bought the property from the Noyeses' son.

La Mesa resident Janet Bower, the Newlans' daughter, spent her childhood there. During her family's ownership, weddings were held on the porch, and social gatherings in the main parlor that the family named "The Green Room."

"Everything was green in that room. The carpet was green; the walls were a pastel green," Bower said.

"We loved that house."

Ultimately, however, the family sold the property to the Waltons in 1985.

The home in 2008

Today, the inside of the home is a mixture of possessions from its former owners.

One bedroom contains original furnishings from the Noyes family, including a turn-of-the-century washstand and a hand-carved headboard on the bed.

Other rooms include Christy Walton's personal remodeling. Lucas Walton's former bedroom is painted with images of sailboats, airplanes and the San Diego skyline.

The shower in the master bathroom, also redone by Christy Walton, includes deep blue tiling decorated with images of fish.

But other than incorporating a few personal touches, and enlarging the kitchen, the home remained relatively modest by today's standards during the Waltons' ownership. No elaborate walk-in closets or luxurious marble bathrooms and no ostentatious show of wealth appear anywhere in the house.

"Even though the Waltons had wealth, they lived a very simple life," Kiy said.

In return, the neighbors let the Waltons have their peace.

"Nobody other than the neighbors knew it was them," said Mayor Ron Morrison, who lives a few blocks away. "Nobody made it an issue. Everyone respected their privacy."

The family, however, did not let their status distance them from their neighbors. On one occasion, the Waltons hosted a birthday party for their son and had horse-drawn carriages brought down from Seaport Village to give their son and the neighborhood children rides.

On a clear day, among the home's many views, Tijuana is visible in the distance, Kiy pointed out during a tour.

“This property presents a really unique opportunity for us, and that's what we saw,” Kiy said. “Our idea is to use the center to promote cross-border dialogue and this is a perfect location – only nine miles away from the border.”

■ Mia Taylor is a freelance writer in San Diego.

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