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NEWS FEATURE

Governor Dedicates Western Justice Center's Restored Headquarters

By DANIELLE GILLESPIE, Staff Writer
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Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger joined the Pasadena community on Tuesday to celebrate the completion of a 22-year project to restore Western Justice Center Foundation's buildings.

"It's a living monument to our highest ideals," Schwarzenegger said at the Ambassador Auditorium to hundreds of community members.

The restored buildings represent the Western Justice Center's mission, which is to end violence through peaceful conflict resolution, Schwarzenegger said.

Judge Dorothy Nelson and a group of other judges and lawyers involved with the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit developed the vision for the nonprofit organization in 1985.

The Western Justice Center's headquarters and conference center was the last of four buildings to be restored. Contractor Nicholas Akers and interior designer Caroline Baker renovated the facilities with a Mediterranean-style to match the original architecture.

The Western Justice Center's buildings were originally part of Vista del Arroyo Hotel, a luxury hotel in the early 1900s. During the Great Depression, the hotel's owners faced bankruptcy. The U.S. Government acquired the buildings in 1943 to use as an army hospital.

In 1949, the U.S. General Services Administration took over the buildings and abandoned them, according to the Western Justice Center's Web site.

In 1985, one building was restored as a courthouse for the U.S. Court of Appeals, Ninth Judicial Circuit. The City of Pasadena purchased the four other buildings and leased them to the Western Justice Center. Today, 17 nonprofit organizations share the campus with the Western Justice Center.

The newly renovated headquarters and conference center was once the vacation getaway home for George Holmes Maxwell, a Boston patent attorney. The house was built on the hotel grounds for Holmes.

On Wednesday, Schwarzenegger thanked Judge Nelson for her commitment to promoting peace and her diligence in restoring the buildings.

"I think what you have accomplished here is really extraordinary," Schwarzenegger said.

The Western Justice Center works at area schools to teach youth how to resolve conflicts, Executive Director Najeeba Syeed-Miller said.

Recently, the center partnered with the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission and City Council to address the rise in violence in Pasadena. The group is working on an initiative called Pasadena-Altadena Vision 20/20. The goal is to develop employment, leadership opportunities and cross-cultural activities for youth who are in gangs or who have the potential to join.

"We believe the power of violence can be displaced ... it starts with our children," Syeed-Miller said.

In response to Schwarzenegger's praise, Nelson recognized him for his dedication to peace.

"Love, inclusion and tolerance has marked his life," Nelson told the crowd.

The governor was once quoted saying "I want kids shooting hoops, instead of shooting up dope or shooting guns," Nelson said.

Schwarzenegger supported the After School Education & Safety Act in 2002 as a positive alternative to participating in gang activities. Nelson also pointed to some of Schwarzenegger's glamorous accomplishments. He was the youngest person to win the Mr. Universe title and won 12 world bodybuilding titles.

"Our governor not only has a great body, but a great mind," Nelson said, laughing.

Following the ceremony, community members had the opportunity to tour the headquarters and conference center, which will be used for public meetings. Photographs on display showed how the rooms looked when the Western Justice Center acquired the building. Many of the rooms were covered in graffiti.

The Western Justice Center invited about 700 students to the event to hear Schwarzenegger speak about the importance of tolerance and peace. Syeed-Miller believes that because Schwarzenegger is a former Hollywood actor, youth can relate to him.

"We wanted to bring this message to the young people," Syeed-Miller said.