

Source: Santa Monica Daily Press

Free 'toy-rary' opens at Upward Bound House

by Emma Trotter

July 15, 2009

WILMONT — The staff of Upward Bound House would like nothing more than to lose their jobs — because that would mean homelessness and the many problems it causes have been eliminated.

As it stands, though, they have a months-long waiting list of families hoping to obtain housing, classes, and other services offered by the agency. The toy loan program, kicked off Tuesday, is a small but important part of those services.

"The program is an antidote to the loss of dignity that can come from being homeless," said Booker Pearson, president of the nonprofit's board of directors. "It can be very meaningful for them to feel like somebody cares."

"Toys are about magic," added Executive Director David Snow. "They take kids out of this life and allow them to imagine and dream."

In keeping with that theme, a magician performed at Tuesday's event. Children from the audience volunteered to help with magic rings and disappearing coin tricks.

"The program gives kids an opportunity to play with toys that their parents might not be able to afford," said Senior Case Manager Cherrise Payne, who works with families to help them get acclimated to the program, connect with services and save money to move into permanent housing. The toy library, she added, is one of Upward Bound's after-care services, open to families who currently live or have lived in the Upward Bound House.

"There is a tsunami of homeless children in the Westside, in California and in the nation," Pearson said. "They are the hidden homeless — they don't sleep in your front yard, throw beer bottles in your back yard or panhandle on the streets. They're not an irritant or a threat, so we ignore them."

Upward Bound House, made up of 80 apartments for seniors and 21 units for homeless families with kids, aims to counteract the effects of this negligence.

In addition to receiving a free toy for attending the opening, once the loan center is fully up and running — which should happen later this week or next week — children will be able to borrow toys on a weekly basis from a "toyrarian."

A child receives a "satisfactory" mark each time a toy is returned on time and in good condition. Incentive for good behavior comes in the form of extra toys and "Honor Borrower" status — conferred after 20 satisfactory marks — at which time a child can choose a toy to keep.

The toy loan honor code reinforces the virtues of honesty, patience, courtesy, promptness, cleanliness, cooperation and responsibility. Old and new toys were donated by corporations, toy manufacturers and private citizens.

"The benefit of the program is that my kids get to play with different toys every time they come back," said Jackie King, Jr., father of seven kids ages nine to 15 who all attended Tuesday's event. "Different toys show my kids different things — each toy has a different meaning."

King and his family have taken advantage of Upward Bound House's parenting and budgeting classes, job aids and trips. Upward Bound also helped them find affordable housing.

"They help families in a time of crisis when they really do need it," King said.

Various local officials made remarks at the event. Flora Gil Krisiloff, from the office of L.A. County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, revealed that the county has over 40 toy loan centers — more than any other county in the nation — and Santa Monica Councilman Bobby Shriver encouraged a young girl to pick out a doll she'd had her eye on amid a cloud of bubbles.

"We get to play with toys all day — we've got a great job," said Marcia Benitez of the county's Department of Public Social Services — which secured many donations for the program.