

LOS ANGELES DOWNTOWN NEWS .COM

BUSINESS, POLITICS, ARTS, CULTURE

THE BARKER BLOCK OFFERS
NEW RESIDENCES IN THE
HEART OF THE ARTS DISTRICT
FROM THE HIGH \$300s

BARKER
BLOCK

learn more >

Monday, September 15, 2008

Enter your email
address to receive our
Weekly News Summary

Subscribe FREE!

SEARCH THIS SITE

SEARCH DOWNTOWN

HOME

NEWS & OPINION

CALENDAR

RESTAURANTS

LISTINGS

CLASSIFIEDS

HEALTH

SPECIAL SECTIONS

DOWNTOWN LIST

BEST OF

LANDMARKS

DEVELOPMENT

DOWNTOWN
LA SCENE

RESTAURANT GUIDE

DOWNTOWN GUIDE

ABOUT US

1111 S. Grand Ave #610
Elleven Loft Downtown LA
1 Bedroom . 1 Bath
\$469,900



Toy Story

New Skid Row Program Gives Kids a Chance to Play

by Ryan Vaillancourt

DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES - On a recent afternoon at Skid Row's Huntington Hotel, about a dozen children raced around the lobby, playing tag and having a blast.



A new Skid Row program allows area children to borrow toys and exchange them each week for a new one. It launched last month in the Huntington Hotel.

Fueled by sugar, they seemed oblivious to the small puddles of fruit punch and smears of crumbled Doritos left in their collective wake. Some free-floating balloons didn't last long; one by one, they exploded in the hands of children like Omari Ford, 2, who just giggled and feigned surprise after he intentionally popped one.

Amid the commotion, hotel manager Al Manning stood to the side of the room, calm and smiling. The mess, he knew, would be cleaned soon enough. More important to Manning was that these children, who in this neighborhood are short on recreational opportunities, had an outlet on that day to be, well, kids.

"Look," Manning said, pointing to the group, which ranged in age from a few months to about 12. "They're having fun."

Though the group seemed content playing tag, the real excitement - and the reason for the get-together - was tied to the anticipation of getting a new toy. That came courtesy of the Los Angeles County Department of Social Services' Toy Loan Program, which launched at the hotel last month.

The little-known program, which has 43 outposts throughout the county, invites children to borrow a toy and return it a week later. If the child returns the toy in good condition, they can get a new toy. Marcia Blachman-Benitez, director of the department's toy loan and volunteer services sections, describes the program as a toy library.

If the child returns a toy five consecutive times, he or she is rewarded with a new toy they get to keep, she said.

"This program, it's always like the icing on the cake for our department because this is the need of the child," Blachman-Benitez said. "We take care of the parent, give them the housing, the shelter, the food, and the smallest need of the kid is just a little bit of joy and laughter when he has a toy in his hands."

The toy loan program is supported largely by toy giant Mattel, which donates the bulk of the program's new toys, Blachman-Benitez said. Private donors also donate new and used toys. About half of the program's inventory, which is stored in a county warehouse, is used, she said.



The location at the Huntington Hotel marks the first toy loan outpost Downtown since the program was shuttered at Para Los Ninos on Lucas Avenue about five years ago, Blachman-Benitez said. While children in the Skid Row area have a need for the program, finding a location in the community has proven difficult.

The program, which must be run in conjunction with public agencies or nonprofits, is housed mostly in city or county parks and recreation facilities, at LAUSD after-school programs or in small nonprofit preschools.

"The appropriate facility just hasn't been available," Blachman-Benitez said.

The Fun Zone

The Huntington, at 752 S. Main St., is home to about 240 low-income residents, including approximately 20 families. When Manning, the hotel manager, first thought of bringing new activities to the children in the neighborhood, he turned to Skid Row activist Ron Crockett.

Crockett, whose penchant for teaching sports to area youth brought on the nickname Coach Ron, lives blocks away from the Huntington in another South Main Street hotel. He too had been eager to do something positive for the youth in the community, he said.

After consulting with Manning, Crockett went to County Supervisor Gloria Molina, who then linked the hotel with the toy loan program, Blachman-Benitez said.

At the Huntington, Crockett, who runs the program with the nonprofit Pasadena Altadena Community Youth Association, has tinkered slightly with the county's toy loan model by combining it with a fledgling reading program.

Children who participate earn points by reading and writing short essays about their book. Once they've amassed enough points, they become eligible

to sign out a toy from the loan program, he said.

He hopes that in the coming months, the program will attract the attention of Downtown Los Angeles residents interested in volunteering to read aloud at the twice-weekly sessions, or propel some book donations. The hotel's library consists of two small boxes containing about 50 titles, most of which are tattered and worn. But that did not deter Judee Suazo, 10, whose mother keeps a room at the Huntington.

"I love to read," Judee said. "I like stories."

Judging by her tight grip on a new Mattel plastic tea set, Judee also loves to play. Among the dozens of new toys brought by DPSS, she picked the tea set so she could play with her mother, she said.

"We have real tea, and we're going to use it," she said.

Judee's friend Jaevonni Warren, 10, went for a fashion-focused package of glitter, textiles and designs to inspire her creative spirit.

"This is my dream, to be a fashion designer," Jaevonni said. "I love this."

Contact Ryan Vaillancourt at ryan@downtownnews.com.

page 1, 9/8/2008

© Los Angeles Downtown News. *Reprinting items retrieved from the archives are for personal use only. They may not be reproduced or retransmitted without permission of the Los Angeles Downtown News. If you would like to re-distribute anything from the Los Angeles Downtown News Archives, please call our permissions department at (213) 481-1448.*

Reader Comments

The following are comments from the readers. In no way do they represent the view of downtownnews.com.

Fred Dobb wrote on Sep 8, 2008 7:59 AM:

" This is an exciting joy filled program that teaches responsibility to kids living in difficult circumstances. A great cooperative venture by the county and its partners. "

Submit a Comment

We encourage your feedback and dialog, all comments will be reviewed by our Web staff before appearing on the Web site.

Name:

Email:

(optional)

Comments:

Image Verification:

