

Some called Bobby Vega the spirit of San Bernardino

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On Thursday, the old community center in Waterman Gardens was dedicated to the memory of youth advocate and community champion Bobby Vega, the kid from San Bernardino's Westside — the rough and ragged barrio — who dreamed of helping others.

Bobby, deputy director of the Urban Conservation Corps, dedicated his life to improving the quality of life for young people, helping them to become productive and responsible members of society.

Bobby died Feb. 7, but he left a legacy that will live forever in the collective memory of the city — productive young people.

In time for the dedication, the 1940s-era center was renovated and painted by young Urban Conservation Corps members — clean and bright — just the way Bobby would have liked it.

About 200 people, along with city leaders, attended the center's grand opening and ribbon-cutting in the sweltering heat.

It was standing room only.

For some, the tears are still too close to the surface.

For Bobby's widow, Sandy Bonilla, sitting in the front row, the accolades and tributes paid to this man of the people were overwhelming.

"After all the love he's given to the city, it's good to know the city loved him, too," said Bobby's daughter, Natalie Lorenz.

Sandy said what touched her the most that day was seeing the mural, painted by corpsmembers, of a man working with kids on an interior wall of the center,

"That's who Bobby was — he was always working with kids," said Sandy, Bobby's wife of 14 years.

"A lot of the boys told me they wished they had the opportunity to thank him before he passed away. I told them, 'He knows,' " Sandy said.

"The corps is what keeps me going. This is what he would have wanted me to do."

As co-founder and deputy director of the corps since its inception in 2006, Bobby was responsible for the workforce development and gang violence prevention and intervention program.

Former Mayor Pat Morris, in February, referred to the nonprofit program as a “statewide model of how to go from gang membership to community membership as a fully responsible tax-paying adult.”

The program, one of the largest programs of the Southern California Mountains Foundation, engages inner-city and at-risk kids in San Bernardino and Riverside counties in conservation projects.

He was doing something right.

Bobby once told me, “All kids are at-risk.”

The 18- to 25-year-old men and women of the corps are provided opportunities for success through job-skill training, education and work experience with an emphasis on conservation and service projects that benefit the community and the environment.

They work as a team on projects that include emergency response, park maintenance, community revitalization, trail building and wildlife habitat restoration.

Now 70 members strong, uniformed Conservation Corps members lined the grassy perimeter of the center in tribute to their mentor.

Corpsmembers who spoke during the ceremony especially moved Sandy.

“The things they said were so touching. Jason Ciabboti, who was having a rough time when he came to us at 18, stayed with us. He’s now 24 and a staff member.”

As though to illustrate Bobby’s guidance with the corps, following the dedication, the Forest Service called eight corpsmembers to a fire.

Bobby also had put their firefighting program together.

“Bobby wanted these boys who had no opportunity to be needed to help fight a fire,” Sandy said. “That was his legacy.”

The young men were glad to go but the moment was bittersweet.

Bobby had a vision for the future. “When this community starts utilizing the resources from within its own neighborhoods, that’s when you’re going to see change,” he said.

Bobby told me he had seen the long-term effects because he was a product of community-based organizations.

Enter the newly dedicated community center.

Programs and services for residents include educational and financial literacy classes, fitness and nutrition, and a meeting place for the Urban Conservation Corps, Boys and Girls Club, senior activities and the Neighborhood Watch.

Bobby was a great friend of the community, a true friend of youth.

The new handpainted sign on the Bobby Vega Community Center will be a longlasting reminder.

And here’s a thought for the day: Don’t ask for an easier life; ask to be a stronger person.

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