

Waterman Gardens Community Center dedicated to Bobby Vega

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SAN BERNARDINO >> Bobby Vega was celebrated during his life as a man who took the disadvantaged and made them an advantage for their community. With long-overdue revitalizations and a new namesake, advocates for lower-income people living in the Waterman Gardens affordable housing complex hope the Bobby Vega Community Center helps do the same.

The community center, dedicated Thursday, has a big name to live up to, said young people Vega had worked with as co-founder of the [Urban Conservation Corps of the Inland Empire](#) and dignitaries who knew his work.

“Bobby was sent to us by God as an angel on Earth,” Councilwoman Virginia Marquez said, before getting a laugh with a representation of Vega’s no-nonsense approach. “He is with us. He’s in heaven right now going, ‘Why are they fussing?’ Because you deserve it, Bobby.”

Vega [died](#) in February after a lifetime as a youth advocate in San Bernardino. He built the Urban Conservation Corps from a group small enough to fit in a 1974 Suburban to 70 people ages 18 to 25 who work on environmental conservation, said Gabe Garcia, district ranger with the U.S. Forest Service.

Many of those he helped faced serious trouble before they joined him, problems that led others to give up on them, but [Vega used to say](#) he could help because he’d seen firsthand what they’d been through.

It worked, said Assemblywoman Cheryl Brown, D-San Bernardino.

“All his life he lived in San Bernardino,” she said. “He knew these neighborhoods inside and out. He knew the culture and the subculture of gangs.”

One of the places where Vega focused his efforts was Waterman Gardens, a complex that has had its challenges and critics.

Although police statistics show crime there is lower than in surrounding areas, the plan to expand the affordable housing complex drew many [concerns](#) about increasing crime and draining government resources before backers were ultimately able to convince the City Council to unanimously [approve](#) the plan in February.

Central to the multi-year plan is modernizing and revitalizing homes built in 1943, as well as a community center built at the same time and barely updated since then.

Waterman Gardens-Hope Through Housing partnered with the San Bernardino County Housing Authority to help it and the company National CORE accomplish that, said Brittany Estrada, coordinator of the program’s Family Resource Center.

“We went around asking what people wanted, and almost every family said they wanted a place where they can meet together,” she said, explaining that many of the families felt they lacked a sense of community. “Programs here, and this center, can help us bring them together.”

The center itself has a kitchen with basic appliances and a room where other activities can take place included in its 5,000 square feet.

Above the exit, a last reminder before re-entering the larger world, large letters read “COMMUNITY IS POWER.”

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