

LOS ANGELES DOWNTOWN NEWS

March 10, 2008

Books and a Playground Come to Skid Row

Para Los Niños Family Learning Complex Opens New Facilities

by **Richard Guzmán**

One of the first things Martha Flores had to do in her new role as the librarian of the Para Los Niños Family Learning Complex was teach the students to be a little quieter in a library.

"They were just overwhelmed, really excited," said Flores last week as she stood in the middle of the 1,800-square-foot Parkes Family Library, which, along with a health clinic and a 20,000-square-foot playground, is the latest addition to the Skid Row charter school that serves 450 kindergarten through fifth-grade students.

Surrounded by more than 7,500 new books, 10 computer stations and a storytelling amphitheatre, Flores, 31, said she has no trouble getting students excited about reading in the new library. "They're amazed by it. They love to read, and they love being here," she said.



A new playground, library and health clinic are the latest additions to the Para Los Niños Family Learning Complex on Skid Row. Photo by Gary Leonard.

One could hardly blame the kids for their excitement; before the library opened, the only books available were collections in individual classrooms.

On Tuesday, March 4, Para Los Niños held a grand opening for the new library, health clinic and playground at 1617 E. Seventh St. More than 100 people, including state Sen. Mark Ridley-Thomas and LAPD Commander Andy Smith, attended the evening event as the 28-year-old nonprofit got a chance to show off the new facilities.

"All the books we have are brand new books. Everything is cataloged. We have a borrowing system, the full-time librarian," said Elena Stern, vice president of external affairs for Para Los Niños. "We also invite parents here and we do parent-teacher conferences when the students aren't using it.

"It's quite extraordinary," she continued. "People walk in and say, 'This is a library on Skid Row?' They are pleasantly surprised."

The more than \$1 million for the additions was raised through donations and grants, and from the library's benefactors, including movie producer Walter F. Parkes, a member of the Para Los Niños Charter School Advisory Board and his wife and fellow producer Laurie MacDonald.

A partnership with Eisner Pediatric & Family Medical Center and donations from Kaiser Permanente helped build the facility's Elizabeth Clinic, named for the wife of an anonymous donor. The clinic will open as soon as a nurse is hired and will offer health services such as vaccinations, TB tests and first aid, as well as public education on health issues to the students and their families.

Normal for Other Neighborhoods

Para Los Niños opened in 1980 to help kids living in Skid Row hotels. It initially aided 45 children with after-school programs, and has grown to help 3,500 low-income children each week and 5,000 families every year at its 24 sites in Southern California. The services now include child development and education, child abuse prevention, English-as-a-second-language classes and mental health counseling. The organization operates with a \$16.5 million annual budget.

The Skid Row charter school takes low-income students whose parents either live in the surrounding area or work in Downtown Los Angeles.

The playground, which opened to students two weeks ago, underwent a total transformation, as it was turned from a dull, asphalt yard into a state-of-the-art athletic field with basketball courts, a running track, bleachers, handball courts, a climbing structure from Finland, and even a garden where children can cultivate vegetables. The asphalt has been replaced beneath the play structure by plexipave, a soft material that helps prevent bumps and bruises.

"Now they have this entire play area," said Stern. "It may look like the norm for other people, but for our children, and their families, this is the only space they have to play in."

Meanwhile, Flores, whom the kids have nicknamed "The Book Lady," said she wants to use the school library to make sure the students feel at home in any library. "I'm trying to make it as close to a public library as possible so that when they go to other libraries, they know automatically where to look for fiction or non-fiction and where everything is located," she said.

For 10-year-old Elmer Diaz, who has attended the school for two years, the new library already feels like home. "It's cool. It has a bunch of books and cool stuff," he said.

He said students had eagerly awaited the opening in January and use the library not only as a place to read, but also to hang out when they are not in class. Diaz has also discovered a love for history books, fiction and books about dragons. They were recommended by the Book Lady.

