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VOL. 32 NO. 28

Your Weekly Community Newspaper

December 17, 2010

Dedication ceremony officially opens Rosie the Riveter Park & Interpretive Center

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After more than three years of planning and fundraising, the Long Beach Rosie the Riveter Park and Interpretive Center officially opened last Saturday. About 150 people came to the dedication ceremony in the three-acre park located at the southwest corner of Clark Avenue and Conant Street.

Fifth District Long Beach City Councilmember Gerrie Schipske spearheaded efforts to develop the park as a way to memorialize and honor the thousands of women who kept America's factories going during World War II, especially the women who worked at the Long Beach Douglas Aircraft plant. "Long Beach has a wonderful history, and everybody needs to know that history," Schipske said, adding that it is very important for everyone to hear the stories of the women who played such a vital role in America's



Neena Strichart/Signal Tribune

Members of the High-Tide quartet (from left) Maureen Coleman, Kathy Mitchell, Lillian Zellmer and Joyce Spillane

victory in the Second World War.

Several federal, state and local elected officials attended the ceremony. Three of them, Congressmember Laura Richardson, State Assemblymember Bonnie Lowenthal and Long Beach Vice Mayor Suja

Lowenthal, took turns at the podium. Each of them paid tribute to the Rosie the Riveters and noted the importance of remembering their significant role in America's history. The three offi-

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cials also thanked Schipske for her hard work in developing the interactive memorial in the park.

Until four years ago, the park was named Douglas Park because it is located just steps away from where thousands of airplanes were manufactured at the Douglas Aircraft plant. About 20 years after the war ended, Douglas Aircraft merged with the McDonnell Corporation to become the McDonnell Douglas Corporation. Later, that corporation was purchased by the Boeing Company, which announced plans to develop a commercial center named "Douglas Park" near the corner of Lakewood Boulevard and Carson Street. Therefore, a new name was needed for the small city park with the same name.

In 2007, at Schipske's request, the City Council unanimously voted to change the park's name to Rosie the Riveter Park. Soon thereafter, Schipske started the Rosie the Riveter Foundation, a nonprofit organization specifically established to raise funds for the park and its exhibits.

"All of us who are public officials are exquisitely sensitive about public resources and the fact that we do not have the revenue that cities once had," Schipske said, stressing that the City's General Fund did not pay for the interpretive center's design and development. Money for those projects came from grants and donations.

"We set out to come up with a design that would allow people to see the history in different forms," she said. "When you start on this walking path, you will see on the pavers a historical timeline." She explained that that timeline, which also includes plaques on trees and light posts, outlines how Douglas Aircraft came to Long Beach and other events pertinent to the war and aircraft production.

Schipske added that even the park's lights were not purchased but taken there after being removed from a North Long Beach parking lot. She added that grant money is also being used to



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Douglas Park officially became Rosie the Riveter Park in 2007

install bike racks in the park.

The Long Beach Navy Memorial Heritage Association (LBNMHA) gave the Rosie the Riveter Foundation approximately \$49,000 for the interpretive center's development. "We are grateful that we could issue them the grant," said Laura Brasser, LBNMHA president. "This park is dedicated to those who have served as well as renewing our interest in the aircraft manufacturing industry, which is such an important part of the history of our city." She added that LBNMHA looks for projects that have meaning for the city and, when possible, provides grants for those projects.

In addition to the plaques and pavers, the park provides a cell phone audio tour. Park visitors can dial phone numbers on various signs and hear directly about Rosies who worked at the Douglas plant or enjoy music from the 1940s.

The park dedication ceremony included the raising of flags by the Millikan High School

JROTC and a wreath-laying provided by Wreaths Across America, a national organization that places Christmas wreaths on every gravesite at the Arlington National Cemetery and 450 other locations. Representatives of the organization laid seven wreaths near the park's compass rose. The wreaths honor the members of the five branches of America's military and the Merchant Marines. One wreath was for prisoners of war and those who are still considered missing in action.

At the conclusion of the ceremony, the High Tide Quartet—a woman's vocal group—led the audience in singing "God Bless America." "Now I ask you to enjoy the park, call on your cell phone and take a listen," Schipske told the audience.

Afterwards, some of the women who had worked at Douglas in the early 1940s expressed their gratitude. "I love this park, and all of us Rosies feel very honored that Gerrie Schipske and the City have dedicated this park to us," said Ceci Julian, who began working at the Long

Beach Douglas plant when she was just 18. "It was very difficult working in the factory in Long Beach," she added. "It was a man's world, and at first they didn't even have women's bathrooms in the building where I worked."

Another Rosie, Stefanian Efland, had a different perspective. "It was wonderful. We were just like a big family," she said. "I love this park, and I am glad we were recognized."

Vinita Rash, who was also a Douglas Rosie in the early 1940s, had come to Long Beach on vacation from a small town in Arkansas. "I was just stricken by the wave of patriotism," she said, explaining that she went to work for Douglas because she wanted to contribute something to the war effort. "We helped make the B-17s," she said. "I am glad the City dedicated this park to what we all did during the war years."

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Fifth District Long Beach City Councilmember Gerrie Schipske and US Rep. Laura Richardson at last Saturday's official opening of the Rosie the Riveter Park and Interpretive Center