

Al Wooten Jr. Youth Center back in business

BY DARLENE DONLOE
Contributing Writer

The week before the Al Wooten Jr. Youth Center was set to reopen on June 29, after 15 months of closure due to the pandemic, Executive Director Naomi McSwain was working day and night with contractors on renovations and construction that included a fresh exterior paint job, sneeze guards on desks, ceiling fans, air filters, moving desks for more social distancing and the installation of bullet-proof glass.

According to McSwain, on several occasions, both when the youth center was open and closed, stray bullets have hit the exterior of the building, lodging in windows, a door, and in the trunk of an associate's car. So before she welcomes back students, she is shoring up areas of the center's six storefront buildings to ensure their safety.

The center's annual budget is \$750,000 but ended last year at \$450,000. The center currently needs \$15,000 to \$20,000 to get the building reinforced so bullets don't penetrate the interior.

"The shooting is more critical than COVID," said McSwain, a former journalist who frequently wrote about gang violence. "This is breaking my heart. We're here because of the conditions and circumstances that led to my cousin being killed.

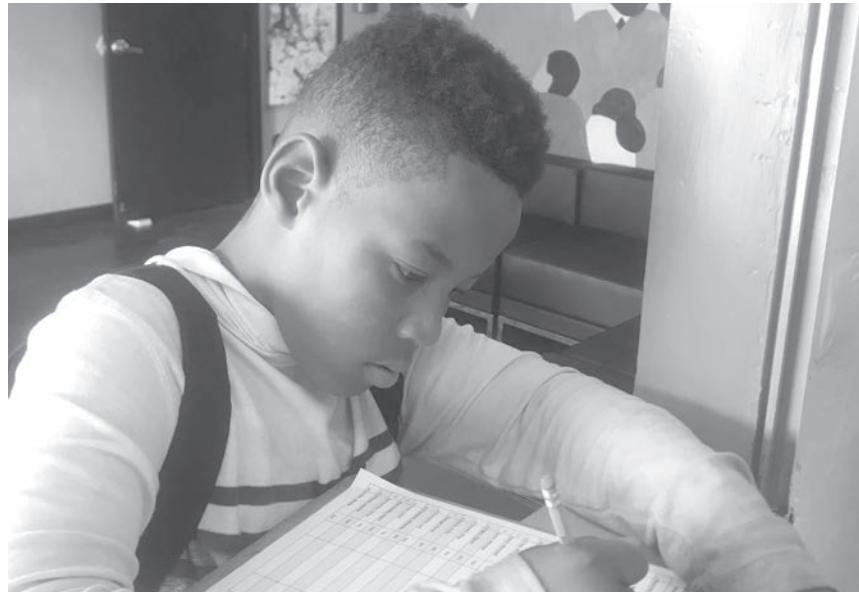
"What's been happening in recent days is former gang members coming out of jail. It's great but to come back and restart wars. It can lead to the kids getting caught in the crossfire."

The cousin to which McSwain refers is Alton "Dunnie" Wooten, Jr., in whose memory the center was launched in 1990. His mother, McSwain's aunt, Myrtle Faye Rumph (now deceased), opened the center in honor of her son.

In January 1989, Wooten, 35, was killed in a drive-by shooting near Adams and Crenshaw boulevards. The shooting was said to be the result of a gang initiation.

Since its opening, the Al Wooten Jr. Youth Center, located on 91st Street and Western Avenue in South Los Angeles, has been a steadfast anchor in the com-

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A young boy does his homework at the Al Wooten Jr. Youth Center in South Los Angeles. The center is reopening its doors after 15 months of closure due to the pandemic.

Courtesy photo

munity.

The center's mission is for "good citizenship and academic excellence." There is a desire to ensure that every student avoids the kind of lifestyle and overcomes the kinds of challenges that led to the murder of Al Wooten Jr.

The center is a refuge. It's a home away from home, a place where neighborhood kids can gather, talk, read, work on computers, be creative, learn math, get tutoring and be mentored. It's a way to keep kids off the street, a neighborhood approach to the revitalization and empowerment of a community in crisis that provides a safe and nurturing environment.

McSwain is passionate about the work being done at the center and would love for more people in the Black community to see the benefits of the organization by helping the center both financially and as volunteers.

"We'd like people to 'catch the vision,' which is our tagline," said McSwain, who grew up as a troubled kid in South Los Angeles. "Just give the kids some time and attention. We always need donations, but we also need help with private tutors.

"Give the kids an opportunity so they can thrive. That's our vision. We'd love for them to thrive and stay alive. We are crying out to our community. See what we see."

McSwain is thankful for the center's many loyal and consistent partners, one

of which is Community Build.

"Community Build gave us a lot of stuff," McSwain said. "We partner with agencies who make a difference. ... They understand the need to leverage resources. I donate to their agencies and they donate to ours."

When the pandemic hit in 2020, Robert Saucedo, president and CEO of Community Build, assembled 32 agencies and partners to pool resources. The organization became known as the Community Response System of South Los Angeles (CRSSLA).

The Al Wooten Jr. Youth Center is part of CRSSLA and McSwain is the chairperson of the education committee.

Saucedo calls her "the crown jewel of CRSSLA."

"I can't find the words for Naomi or her work ethic commitment and vision which turns into reality," Saucedo said. "They have operated on a level of excellence."

The Wooten Center reopened this week for the Summer Fun Camp, an educational summer bridge program for kids in grades 3-9.

Operating as a hybrid, 28 students are expected at the center, with up to 60 participating online.

STEM classes including animation, engineering and robotics are offered each year, along with tutoring, performing and visual arts, sports and recreation, field trips and more. During the sessions, students get to reinforce

MAKING A DIFFERENCE



the math, reading, writing and science skills oftentimes forgotten over summer — something called the "summer slide" or, more recently, the "COVID slide."

Isidra Person Lynn joined the center in May 2020 as an English language arts lead tutor. Her first case was a male student who was a high school senior in danger of not graduating. In order to graduate, he was given three weeks to make up nearly a semester's worth of assignments.

"He was a smart kid but he just wanted to play video games," Person-Lynn said. "I asked him, 'How do you eat an elephant?' I told him, 'One bite at a time.' This can happen.

"You have to do what is needed," Person-Lynn added. "It was a team effort. We worked hard and did it. Families should know that they can put their children in tutoring. It's free.

"That kid had lost focus, but he wanted to graduate and he did. He graduated in 2020. I cried. I also get something out of it. It's rewarding. It's a village effort."

The center offers after-school and summer programs, tutoring, including a popular and effective one-on-one tutorial program and other activities for youths 8 to 18.

Classes include an animation lab, energy lab, reading and math lab, and languages.

There is CollegeTrek Online, a virtual after-school program with college and career readiness for students in grades 3-12. The program offers diagnostics and private tutoring in reading and math homework assistance, and various classes, discussion groups and workshops held on Zoom at no cost.

There is also a MyCollegeTrek for teens ages 13 and up.

In addition to one-on-one tutoring and study groups, the center offers weekly classes in coding, robotics, world languages and culture, and performing arts, as well as a virtual playground. It also offers SAT-prep workshops, college advisement, a monthly College and Career Day, monthly College Admission Pro-

cess workshops, discussion groups such as Teen Talk, Girl Talk, and Kid Talk, and monthly Juvenile Justice Jeopardy classes engaging cops and kids in a digital game teaching teens about juvenile law.

The pandemic exposed even more attention needed in the community. The Wooten Center responded by launching a parent power group series to meet the needs of parents, grandparents and guardians that arose due to the pandemic.

The group covers such topics as budgeting and generating income, finding a job during the pandemic, teaching kids responsibility and discipline, basics of math and English language arts for parents, and tips to help their child go to college.

During summer 2020, the center distributed food boxes and shared resources and referrals for housing, employment and other urgent needs.

The center also provides various scholarships, including the Ron Glass Memorial Scholarship named after the "Barney Miller" actor who was an active board member before his death.

The Wooten Center was supposed to celebrate its 30th anniversary with a gala dinner in 2020, but due to COVID, it has been put on hold.

The center will host a no-cost spring clearance effort from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. July 2. In an effort to increase social distancing space, the center is giving away a number of items for free.

Items include school and office furniture and supplies, kitchen appliances and gadgets, toys, books, clothing, toiletries, and other used and new items.

For information, call (323) 756-7203.

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