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THANKS TO VCHC, NOT ALL THE RENTS HAVE GONE UP

Venice Community Housing Corporation works to preserve and build a better Venice

By Stacey Levno

Venice Community Housing Corporation is an organization that offers a wide variety of programs dedicated to preserving and expanding job opportunities and availability of affordable housing for low-income people within and beyond the Venice community.

Centrally located in the Oakwood neighborhood of Venice, it's easily accessible to an area where, according to recent statistics, 42 percent of the population lives at or below the poverty line.

www.westsidetoday.com

Community activists, including Steve Clare who is also the executive director of the organization, founded VCHC in 1988. Together, they decided to do more than simply advocate for shelter and affordable housing for the hundreds of homeless people who had been encamped on Venice Beach at the time.

Escalating rents and property values, especially along the coast, had created a rift in the community and threatened to displace the diversity of people who made up the Venice community. VCHC was born to address the needs of affordable housing development and has expanded to do much more during the 14 years of its existence.

Clare is an attorney who has long been interest-

ed in community activism, and Kristen Laskaris is the development director at VCHC. She said Clare is a major presence within the organization as well as the community.

"He has initiated so many programs," she said. "He encouraged its growth from a fledging team of people and services to a three-million-dollar-plus per year organization."

Clare is also a co-founder of the Tenant Action Center, a free housing legal services clinic, and has provided assistance to many community groups.

Not only has poverty been a factor in preventing greater stability in the area, but high levels of crime within small pockets of Venice and Mar Vista have also been crippling. The poverty rate in Oakwood is more than three times the national average, and in 1998, the Los Angeles Police Department reported that 90 percent of the crime in the 24-square-mile Pacific policing division occurred in the two square miles of Oakwood and Mar Vista. In response to the heightened gang violence in those areas, in 1994 VCHC expanded their services to include economic development.

VCHC offers a variety of programs that work from complementary angles to foster stable, self-reliant individuals, families and neighborhoods. The organization's signature program provides 129 units of affordable housing in 11 buildings in Venice and Mar Vista, and includes a 32-bed transitional shelter for formerly homeless mothers and children and a 30-unit development in the heart of gang territory in Mar Vista.

The Youth Build Construction Job Training Program offers leadership skills and training in construction for at-risk youth ages 17-24. It also helps young people

earn their GEDs or high school diplomas if they haven't yet done so.

Venice Clay Works provides job-training; graduates work in construction

and mosaic tiling, in which they build, renovate and decorate buildings within the community. There are also Clay Works For Kids, the Infant Toddler Development Center and the HandyWorker program.

Since the programs are implemented by both staff members and volunteers, many volunteer opportunities are available.

Laskaris said they are especially looking for volunteers to help develop new fund-raising events.

One such event, a jazz concert, has taken place at Palms Court every September for the last ten years, but they are looking to produce additional events throughout the year.

Other volunteer opportunities exist for graphic artists, artists who have knowledge of mosaic tiling, people to help with computer literacy, tutoring at-risk youth, public relations and researchers.

If you are interested, please contact development director Kristen Laskaris at (310) 399-4100, ext. 106. Or write her c/o Venice Community Housing Corporation, 720 Rose Ave., Venice, CA 90291. For general information go to www.vchcorp.org.

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Colwyck Grant, (right) Venice Youth-Build graduate, receives his diploma from Dan Wasserman, (center) who is deputy district director for Congresswoman Jane Harman, and Angela Davison, (left) field representative for Assemblyperson George Nakano, 53rd District. Colwyck is now a full-time student at Santa Monica Community College studying graphic arts and cosmetology.

"Venice is my home," said Clare, a native of Pittsburgh, who moved to the historically artsy-funky coastal town in 1968. "Beatniks, artists, wealthy Hollywood stars and low-income African-American and Latino families all live here together. I'm committed to preserving the unique diversity of Venice."