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New Jennifer Russell Building is Awesome

By Adam Blake

With summer in full swing, the Lafayette Community Center is a bustling hub for the town, offering classes, camps, and special events. The sleek, recently completed Jennifer Russell building, named in honor of the Parks, Trails & Recreation director, has proven to be a tremendous upgrade for the facility.

As Russell prepares for retirement in September, she reflected on her 37-year career with the Parks and Recreation department and the transformations of the community center has undergone, from a crumbling former elementary school to the vibrant stronghold it is today.

Born and raised in Lafayette, Russell has been dedicated member of the community her entire life. She described her tight-knit neighborhood growing up as a "miniature community center," which helped inspire her to enter the field of parks and rec.

"Every oak tree had tree forts and zip lines and we would do fairs and parade around the driveway," Russell remembers. "We had a great swimming pool that the whole neighborhood shared and we would do big events for the Fourth of July and have an incredible haunted house."

Russell was hired by the city in 1979, only 10 years after Lafayette became incorporated. In 1984 the city purchased the facility that had previously been Burton Elementary with the intention of establishing a community center. Russell was given the daunting task of overseeing renovations on the building, which had been vacant for six years.

"This building was completely shuttered, there were boards tacked onto a whole bunch of broken windows, all the doors were nailed shut." Russell said. "It was really a very desolate, sad looking facility."

Russell fought hard to revive the facility and helped establish the Community Center Foundation, which continues to raise funds today. Little by little the facility continues to be updated; however the only new structure is the Jennifer Russell building.

The \$2.4 million multipurpose room opened on October 1 and replaced the aging Manzanita room, which was built in 1954. The modern, energy efficient 5,300 square foot space is used for summer camps, sports activities, fundraisers and private events. For 12 years Russell pushed for the new building and felt relieved when it rose to the top of the priority list.

"I think the city looked at this community center as financially very successful," Russell said. "It seemed that a good thing to reinvest into something that successful so that it can continue to grow which is exactly what the new building allowed us to do: offer a lot more than we ever could before." Camp Awesome is using the space this summer and has strongly felt the benefits of the new building. Counselor Michael Fink described upgrades such as air conditioning, extra space for indoor sports, and embedded TVs for movies and videogames.

"The bathrooms and drinking fountains are the best part because we no longer have to do continuous bathroom trips to the public restrooms and no longer have to fill up coolers and use cups to give the kids water," Fink said.

Russell was delightfully surprised at the demand to use the new space, which she says has exceeded expectations. Highlights from the past year include the haunted house on Halloween and the Lafayette Partners in Education fundraiser. Even more unexpected however, was when she first learned that the building would be named for her. In fact, almost a year after completion she still is getting used to seeing her named displayed in shiny, white letters over the entrance of the structure.

"It's still a surprise...when I drive in and I see my name up there I go 'what is that?'" Russell said. Russell was caught off guard at a general staff meeting when the mayor at the time, Brandt Andersson, made an appearance and suggested the building should be named in her honor.

"I couldn't hold it back and I just took my coat and put it over my head and started crying," Russell said. "Commissioner Singer slid me some Kleenexes and I kept thinking 'get it together.'"

Ironically, Russell had helped write the original naming policy with the intention of recognizing

volunteers and was not expecting a staff member to be suggested, let alone herself. Russell's fellow staff members, however, felt strongly that she deserved the recognition.

"Jennifer was there for the repurposing of the school; she helped develop every aspect of the center since the city took over the site and it's fitting that the first brand new building on site be named after the person that work so hard to build a center that the community could be proud of," Recreation Supervisor Jonathan Katayanagi said.

With only a couple of months left on the job, Russell noted that she's never been bored a single day in her career, but as a self-described nature nut, looks forward to having time to enjoy the surroundings and explore national parks.

"It's been a great ride and I feel good about handing the baton to someone who is going to be as energetic, and have the passion to keep things going," Russell said.

"I've never been bored at this job, not one day. There's always surprises. You never know what the day's going to bring, both positive and negative. It's a wonderful career, especially in a town that you know well and you want the best for. So you do your darndest and you can become very passionate.

"Over the years there are many times that I'd said, 'I don't have time for that.' So I have to say I'm looking forward to finally having the time for the things that I keep saying I don't have time for. I love to hike, I'm a real nature nut so I'm really looking forward to going to some national parks that I've always wanted to go to."

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