

VETERANS PARK CONSERVANCY: ROSE GARDEN CEREMONY

By Nancy Freedman | December 17, 2011

This wasn't your typical garden party – not with Debbie Reynolds and lots of veterans mingling with Brentwood community members doing Tai Chi on the lawn. But those were among the highlights at the December 5th ceremony formally opening the historic Women Veterans Rose Garden at the Los Angeles National Veterans Park.



The event was a joint effort of the Veterans Park Conservancy (VPC), which raised more than a million dollars to restore the garden as a healing environment, and the Veterans Administration's Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System.

The Garden is the VPC's first major project undertaken by the VPC since the group removed rusted chain link fences and installed major perimeter fencing with pilasters around the VA property and the National Cemetery.

It is also a key component of the VA's new Integrated Health initiative, Patient-Centered Care which, among

other aspects, provides alternative therapies to veterans such as Tai Chi, yoga, meditation and other treatments to help veterans through their healing process.

Brentwood residents Peter and Merle Mullin, who spearheaded the fund raising effort for the VPC, led off the program following the Color Guard from New Directions on the VA campus. Peter Mullin noted that thousands of veterans returning from Afghanistan and Iraq now have a "tranquil and wonderfully peaceful place for recuperation."

He reported that this site is one of only four prototypes in the entire VA System nationwide. The Garden is also the first phase of the VPC's ambitious plans for the Park – an outdoor amphitheater for various activities, including an entertainment venue, a running track, volleyball court and other activities and veterans tributes.

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He noted that the VPC has evolved over 25 years from its original mission of saving the property from sale (as a stadium, shopping center and other concepts) to enhancing the property, replacing a rusted chain link fence with miles of decorative wrought iron fencing, restoring the Bob Hope Chapel and other enhancements.

Donna Beiter, Director the VA-GLAHS, spoke about the “revolutionary effort” at the VA, trying to meet the needs of veterans in new and innovative ways. She noted that the building adjacent to the Rose Garden was about to begin construction, to emerge as the VA’s new integrative health and healing center.

The patient centered care program, using LA as an example, will eventually roll out across the country.

Merle Mullin introduced the legendary Debbie Reynolds, who gave an emotional account of how she was affected by her three trips to visit troops in Korea as a 17-year-old, which she called “the most amazing experience of my life.” The actress-singer called the Garden “beautiful” and offered her support for veterans.

Sandy Robertson, who oversees Integrated Health initiatives for the VA, also spoke about the VA’s aim to provide “a doorway to healing for everyone...(whether using) body therapies such as Tai Chi and Yoga, cognitive training such as stress management, or spiritual approaches such as meditation.”

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Ms. Robertson noted that studies showed veterans wanted new techniques to “redirect their bodies’ healing mechanisms in ways that are different than medication or traditional medical approaches. “The cooperation of the VPC has helped us accelerate some of these opportunities that raise the bar for the rest of the VA,” she added.

Two veterans took the stage to acknowledge how the

VA’s new alternative therapies have changed their lives. Thomas Sells, a Purple Heart and Bronze Star recipient, returned from Vietnam 45 years ago and, in his words, “wandered the streets of Los Angeles for 20 years in an alcoholic and drug induced stupor.”

He described himself today as “a beneficiary of this modern day’s Veterans Administration,” and thanked his Tai Chi master for healing his body, inside and out,” as well as his yoga instructor and acupuncturist.

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Laurie Bennett, another veteran, also praised Tai Chi as a “dream come true,” affecting her life and vision to be healthy and whole and to feel safe in the community.” She discussed how such therapies create an “inner smile” that brings optimism to true health possibilities and that healing is incomplete without the energy derived from these new therapies.