

Agencies hold ribbon-cutting ceremony at new Live Oak community center

By KIMBERLY WHITE

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LIVE OAK - Two months after they moved into their new digs, staff, volunteers and clients of the two nonprofit agencies that now call the Live Oak Community Center home joined with county representatives to make it official.

A grand opening and ribbon-cutting ceremony held Friday afternoon included tours of the 7 ,500-square-foot building at 1740 17th Ave., and kicked off with a series of speeches from those involved with the project.

The new building triples the space for the Community Bridges/Live Oak Family Resource Center and the Volunteer Center of Santa Cruz County, which previously worked out of cramped quarters on Capitola Road and Emeline Avenue.

Among the beneficiaries is Maria Elena Matthews, who brings her young son to the center each week as both a social outlet and to participate in programs geared toward teaching better parenting skills.

Sam Storey, the mayor of Capitola and CEO of Community Bridges, said the building now serves as a "vibrant focal point for the Live Oak community," and emphasized that a comfortable physical environment "is important about how we feel about ourselves and our community."

Bob Hamilton, a project manager with the county's Redevelopment Agency, called the new building one of only two or three projects "that gave me the most emotional satisfaction."

The family resource center, which takes up the

first floor, operates a series of programs aimed at strengthening families and improving residents' quality of life. Executive Director Elizabeth Schilling thanked those who worked to bring the project to fruition, but added that her happiness "is mixed with grief about the crisis hitting our government" and "the erosion of our social fabric."

The second floor houses the Volunteer Center of Santa Cruz County, which links volunteers with hundreds of nonprofits. Executive Director Karen Delaney said at least 100 people come to the building each day to participate in literacy, parent education, supervised visitation, tutoring and other programs.

Two new building is the result of talks between the two women that started four years ago, when they first broached the idea of creating a centralized location for their services.

The county's Redevelopment Agency contributed about \$5 million to the project, while a capital campaign raised another \$1 million to cover maintenance costs. The agencies have a 30-year, rent-free lease.

While the speeches continued, Live Oak resident Mariah Roberts, 37, played with her two young children in a sandbox outside. She's involved with

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the newly launched Leadership In Our Neighborhoods program, which aims to get residents involved in creating solutions to the problems they identify in their neighborhoods. Through her involvement in LION, she said, she was approached to serve as a volunteer this summer, teaching middle school-aged students how to paint murals.

"We don't have any government in Live Oak," she said. "We have (Supervisor John Leopold), who's fabulous, but he's just one guy ... To have a community center is huge."

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