

# Friends of St. Lawrence Watts Youth Center



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# Watts Hope Not Hopeless

The Friends of St. Lawrence-Watts Youth Center is located in the Watts area of south Los Angeles. Watts is home to 4 large government housing developments and crime rates are among the highest in the city. The median household earnings is \$22,872. In Watts, 50% of families with children live below the national poverty level of \$18,811 for a family of four and the number rises to 65% in female head of household families. Approximately 95% of the school children receive government-subsidized lunches. Most neighborhood families struggle just to provide the necessities of food and clothing for their children.

The news media is full of stories about the problems families face in the neighborhood. In a KABC Primetime Peter Jennings report aired June 1, 2004 on life in Southeast Los Angeles, it was reported that (based on crime statistics) crime was down that year in all parts of Los Angeles except Southeast Los Angeles.

In an interview with Kitty Felde, host of KABC Talk of the City

magazine Peter Jennings talked of his year covering crime in Southeast LA riding with a LAPD gang unit. "This 10 square mile area is home to 65 to 70 black and Latino gangs. What struck us in the course of the year was that the violence, tension and conflict in the area goes unnoticed by the rest of the city at large; in part because of its isolation from the city. These are living breathing communities where families and businesses are choked and smothered to death by gangs and the struggle between gangs vs police and gangs vs gangs."

Kitty Felde said she was stunned not by the images of death and shootings but "what I brought away was the image of the kids playing in the vacant lot throwing rocks at each other." Mr. Jennings replied, "Yes, They have nothing to do and no place to go. In other parts of the city there would be a ball field or a playground there." He stated that policing can contain the violence but not solve the problem. "The way to solve the problem is not policing; it's jobs, education, keeping families together, of not giving up

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and giving them something to hope for so they have a notion of going upward and not being suppressed by other forces.

In a press conference on February 1, 2007, City Attorney Rocky Delgadillo called Markham Middle School in



Watts "...the toughest, most dangerous middle school in the city." Delgadillo stated the following statistics (crimes committed in the school safety zone from 2003 to 2006) show the extent of the problem.

- 145 assaults with a deadly weapon
- 186 cases of battery
- 8 murders
- Police also received 200 reports of missing or runaway juveniles during the last three years.

What the news media often does not report on is the areas bright spots. Little wonder that some of us from outside Watts are hesitant to travel there. That's a shame because that means few of us get the opportunity to know and appreciate the people that comprise the community of Watts. Albert Pichardo, Friends newest board member, explains "Only about 1% of the people cause the problems you hear about on the news. The other 99% are hard working people trying to make a better life for their children." Pichardo grew up in Watts and graduated from St. Lawrence of Brindisi. He remembers Watts as a normal town with a bustling downtown where people would go shopping.

The 1965 Watts Riots changed everything. Pichardo was visiting his grandmother in Tijuana during the riots and heard the events unfold on the news. "News media sensationalized events just like they do now," Pichardo explains. When he and his family came back on that August day, to check on family, he saw a National Guard sign that read "Turn Left or Die". That fall as he walked to high school he saw the National Guard go by. "It felt like living in a war zone," he remembers. Over 40 lives were lost in that disturbance.

Many families left Watts after the riots and it took many years to build the burned area back up. Pichardo graduated from Verbum Dei and accepted a scholarship to the University of Portland. "Everyone was leaving. I wanted to leave too. Not just my small crowded house but also the City and its problems," recalls Pichardo.

Pichardo left but returned to Los Angeles after college. He received his MBA from the UCLA Anderson School of Business and worked in the aerospace industry. After a long and successful career he was able to take early retirement from Raytheon. He attributes his success to his parents.

His mother only went to school through the eighth grade because she got started late. She and her family went to Mexico on the "Hoover Train" during the depression when she was 5. She returned when she was 10, started 1st grade, and graduated from grade school at age 18. His father was a migrant worker (no work available

during the Depression) and so his father didn't get to stay in one place long enough to get a decent education. Regardless his parents instilled a love of education in their children and all 6 siblings attended college and 3 of them earned advanced degrees. "My mom didn't limit us. She let us know we could be anything we wanted", he exclaims.

Pichardo's parents are still in Watts and he looks after them. He has tried other parishes but Father Peter draws him to St. Lawrence Brindisi. He feels he has been very fortunate and had educational opportunities which

"Only about 1% of the people cause the problems... The other 99% are hardworking people trying to make a better life for their children."

have allowed him to retire at age 57. Once Fr. Peter learned Pichardo was retiring he recruited him as a volunteer. Along with his board responsibilities to Friends, he is a member on the parish council, the regional parish council and on the area's Gang Task Force. He is also helping to plan St. Lawrence's Centennial Celebration slated for September 2008.

Through a higher education Pichardo has had a better life for himself. Therefore, giving scholarships is his way of giving back to the community. He is currently sponsoring 3 grade school scholarships and 3 high school scholarships. "It's more meaningful when you see the gratitude in the kids' eyes", he concludes.

Friends of St. Lawrence - Watts Youth Center director, Linda Northup, shares these sentiments "When you look into the children's eyes you see such hope and determination", she



Summer

The Rancho La Tajauta Land Grant

Watts was incorporated

St. Lawrence Brindisi Founded

Annexed by the City of Los Angeles

Watts Towers were constructed

Watts Riots

First ESL Classes Offered

Friends of St. Lawrence - Watts Youth Center Founded

Literacy Center Opens

CompuTeen Program Launched

Literacy Center Acquires New "Home"

1820

1907 1908

1926

1921 to 1954

1965

1993

1999

2001

2003

2006 →

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exclaims. "They haven't given up hope so how can we?"

Anna is the perfect example of what these children can accomplish with a little help. In the third grade, Anna was in the bottom 25% of her class in reading. She attended the Literacy Center and the tutoring; along with her hard work and determination made it possible for Anna to graduate near the top of her eighth grade class. She will be attending Notre Dame Academy in the fall. Anna's next challenge is to come up with the tuition; she is confident that a benefactor will help

her make her dreams come true.

Pichardo wants people to know "Watts is a microcosm of a diverse population. I see a lot of single moms struggling to make ends meet and they want to give their kids a better life than they have. The media has distorted the feelings of the good people of Watts. It's not as scary as people think. Yes, you have to watch yourself and be careful but there is no reason to be fearful. Watts is like any other city. Hopefully they can experience a rebirth once fear is abated."

Friends of St. Lawrence-Watts Youth Center is dedicated to empowering the families of Watts to overcome the challenges they face through programs that encourage academic achievement, community involvement and awareness of opportunities within and beyond Watts. Friends gives the families of Watts the tools they need to succeed in making a better life for their children. It is our dream that the next generation of Watts families will see Watts as a great place to grow up and raise a family.

## A Letter From Our Founder



Fr. Peter previously wrote:

My Dear Friends

The week of October 5th, 2003 I will never forget. I celebrated Masses for three young men who were murdered. I felt a little despondent. On October 8th a reporter came from the Los Angeles Times to interview me. As she was talking with me in the parking lot at 3pm, children began arriving. She asked me "What is going on?" I said "Come and see". We entered the hall where so many children had gathered for the mentoring program with 20 High School tutors. The reporter [Jill] said "This is wonderful". I said, "Jill you should report this wonderful thing too". We are trying to make sure that what happened this week will not happen in the future.

I have been 15 years in Watts. My greatest joy is to see young children get a good education. It is the road out of the inner city. God bless you who are helping to make it happen. If I were to die today, my last request would be "Help our little ones look forward with hope to a bright future"

God bless you for making a better world possible for my children.

God's abundant Love Joy and Peace

Father Peter Banks



Pictured front row from left: Mardi Gras king Charlie Steinmetz; Kim Brooke; and Alma Reaves Woods; middle row: John Utley; Antonia Carpenter; Father Peter Banks; Rosa Meza; Teresa Perez; Mollie Baumer; and Rich Meehan; back row: Cindy Bryne; Linda Northup and John Coughlin.

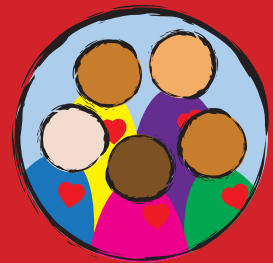
## 2007 Mardi Gras Party

Friends of St. Lawrence – Watts Youth Center’s fourth annual Mardi Gras Dinner and Auction was held Tuesday, February 20, 2007 at American Martyrs Church in Manhattan Beach. The sold out dinner and auction was attended by nearly 275 attendees including community leaders from the South Bay Beach Cities, Palos Verdes, the San Ynez Valley and Watts. The event raised over \$110,000 to support Friends programs and an additional \$37,000 was raised to sponsor scholarships for St. Lawrence grade school students.

## Save The Date - Mardi Gras 2008 - February 5, 2008

To continue to assist the children and families in our Watts neighborhood we need your help.

- ♥ Your donation of:
  - \$20 will buy a reading workbook.
  - \$25 will buy an ESL book.
  - \$50 will purchase needed reading software.
  - \$200 will pay for one month of tuition to a school in a safe environment.
  - \$ 275 pays for a bus for a field trip.
- ♥ Make a monthly pledge of \$20 a month and at the end of the year you will have donated \$240. We are a 501(c)(3) charitable foundation dedicated to meeting the needs of the local community.
- ♥ Honor that special person with a tribute card from Friends of St. Lawrence-Watts Youth Center. It’s the perfect gift, just the right size, practical and thoughtful. To honor any occasion your donation (\$20 minimum each) “in memory of” or “in honor of” will be acknowledged with a beautifully personalized handwritten calligraphied card. Your tax-deductible gift will honor the recipient and help enrich the Watts community.
- ♥ Friends also offers scholarship tribute cards. By donating \$2000 or pledging \$200 for 10 months, you could sponsor a child’s tuition in someone’s name. The honoree will receive a picture of the sponsored child along with the tribute card. There is no better gift than a smile on a child’s face.
- ♥ Your time and expertise is also needed. We are especially looking for: copy writers; print and web designers; tutors; construction workers.



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