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ORANGE COUNTY REPORT

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Rescue Mission Chief Gets White House Invitation For Faith-Based Conference

For Jim Palmer, president of the Orange County Rescue Mission, a recent visit to Washington, D.C., was a career highlight.

Palmer was one of only a handful of people on stage with President George Bush for the White House's first Faith-Based Initiatives Conference. He said he's grateful for the invitation but wishes he could have happened 12 years ago, when he took the Rescue Mission's helm.

Since that time Palmer's battled and cajoled bureaucracies in Santa Ana, Tustin and the federal government to bring his capital projects to fruition.

Most recently he was invited to the gathering of more than 2,000 people after Bush learned of Palmer's refusal to accept \$1 million in federal funding to because of the strings that were attached.

The Rescue Mission is only \$2.7 million away from the \$25 million it needs to pay for completion of its Village of Hope being built on 5 acres at the former Marine Corps Air Station at Tustin. Palmer says the funds that have been raised all have come from individual and corporate donations.

Completion of The Village of Hope is planned for next spring. It consists of two existing barracks buildings that have been remodeled to accommodate 192 families. New facilities being added include a support office, donation warehouse and chapel that seats 300. Operations will include an adult vocational center, child development center, dining facility and medical clinic.

"The president learned about us a number of years ago when a member of his staff told him about us fighting some of the battles to get our project built on the Tustin base. Most specifically, the federal government through HUD told us, 'You can't have a building called a chapel. Even though your program is a faith-based program, you just can't do that.'"

"The HUD executives went so far as to tell us to change it and call it an auditorium and 'We'll look the other way,'" Palmer said.

"We said that's ridiculous because if we use it as a chapel and there are presentations and churches come in and share that's really misleading. So we continued to turn down the money which was more than a \$1 million grant," Palmer said.

Subsequently, Palmer says Bush has cited the Rescue Mission in speeches, "talking about the fact that we were willing to stand up and fight for a level playing field. There was no constitutional issue with what you name a building or even how you used it," Palmer says.

It's an eerie coincidence that the Rescue Mission is building this project at the very place where the organization was founded.

It was 41 years ago when a Marine Corps sergeant, Lewis Whitehead, who was stationed at the helicopter base, noticed there were homeless people just outside the base's main gates. He began taking them leftovers from the mess halls.

Over time, says Rescue Mission spokeswoman Melanie McNiff, Whitehead realized the need was so great that he opened up a little storefront in Santa Ana and started providing meals.

"From there the Rescue Mission grew to the point where we've come full circle and now are back at the same place with this huge project," she said.

Donors to the effort and members of the organization's board of directors are a virtual who's who of Orange County individuals and companies, including many in the building industry.

Among those at the top of the list is Howard Ahmanson, heir to the Home Savings & Loan fortune. Palmer was the 19-year-old president of Irvine Temporary Housing when he first met Ahmanson.

"Howard has been a supporter and instrumental with every project I've acquired, built or dreamed up since I started here," said Palmer, who took over the Rescue Mission 12 years ago.

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