

New SoMa Health Center finally opens

\$47 million project: clinic plus housing

BY TOM CARTER

WESTBROOK Plaza, a SoMa project 20 years in the making, was dedicated June 9 as the city's first combo housing and health center in San Francisco forged from the ground up by a public and private partnership.

The \$47 million project on Seventh Street between Folsom and Howard houses the new nonprofit South of Market Health Center, a state-of-the-art medical and dental clinic occupying 20,000 square feet on two floors in one of the plaza's two Mercy Housing Corp. buildings. Together they contain 49 units of low-cost family housing.

The five- and four-story buildings were financed by the Redevelopment Agency, tax credits and loans from U.S. Bank, Wells Fargo and National Cooperative banks.

Master of Ceremonies Charles Range, health center executive director, told 80 well-wishers baking under a noon sun in the breezeway between the buildings that the health center board in 1991 had voted to build a new facility with no inkling how that would be achieved. The old SoMa Health Center, established in 1973 three blocks

away at 261 Minna St. was staffed and outfitted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. But the building, a gift from a private citizen, was severely damaged by the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.

Over the past 15 years, the west SoMa neighborhood has seen the rise of 2,210 new units of affordable housing and increasing health care needs for adults and children.

The half-acre complex, owned and operated by Mercy Housing, is named after activist Elouise Westbrook, who came from Texas in the 1940s and settled South of the

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CENTRAL CITY

EXTRA

SAN FRANCISCO

30 YEARS OLD



PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO

At his stand on the market's west side, Morgan Hill farmer Tony Nello was "swamped" by customers on opening day in 1981 and continues to do brisk business.

The super market

Heart of the City a success since Day One in 1981

BY TOM CARTER

HEART of the City Farmers Market will champion its 30 years at U.N. Plaza in September, having successfully connected local farmers to the city's famously low-income central city residents while continuing to move toward a healthier San Francisco.

The food nation innovation, announced on circulated flyers in five languages, began Sunday June 14, 1981. Trucks laden with fresh produce, and hailing from Sebastopol to Winters to Fresno, rumbled onto the red brick plaza at daybreak, crunching stray needles and lost crack pipes, and rudely waking a homeless encampment near the federal building. Heart of the City thus became the San Francisco's second outdoor market behind the larger one, Alemany Farmers' Market, off Interstate 280. And it was an immediate success. Just about every stall sold out that day.

Heart of the City market featured 15 farmers its first day. Now, during peak summer months, more than 90 fill the plaza and 100 names are on a waiting list. That day, \$14 of produce was paid for with food stamps. Today, food stamp sales are nearing \$4,000. In a statistic that reflects the demographics of the neighborhood, roughly 75%

of all food stamps accepted at farmers' markets in the city are spent here. Crowds that numbered in the hundreds soon became 1,000, and the market added Wednesday as a second day.

On a festooned stage Sept. 14, the day designated to celebrate Heart's big 3-0, anticipated guest speakers Mayor Ed Lee and District 6 Supervisor Jane Kim are expected to heap praise on the win-win market that nonetheless has had struggles with economic downturns and setbacks from city policy.

In contrast to the Alemany Farmers' Market, which is run by the city, Heart of the City is independent, a nonprofit with a board of directors consisting of five farmers elected by farmers and two at-large members. The market originally was a joint project of Greater Market Street Development Project and American Friends Service Committee. But, in 1982, it got its own 501(c)(3) tax exemption and has paid the city only a \$1 annual rental fee ever since. The Real Estate Division issues its license.

"In the beginning, people couldn't wait for the market to open," says Tony Nello, a third-generation farmer from Morgan Hill who was here in 1981. "Some were here before dawn. Southeast Asians. We were swamped."

Nello has 120 acres and a 600,000-square-foot greenhouse for flowers, a smart business addition he made to his fruits and vegetables when the medfly scourge threatened California produce in the 1980s. He's a farmer 24-7, he says, having started at age 6, shunning toys after school for growing plants. He was a good student and a fast runner who the high school track coach tried to

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PHOTO BY TOM CARTER

Marian Snelgro, granddaughter of the plaza's namesake, cuts the ribbon with Health Center Director Charles Range at her shoulder.