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All-Sentinel Team

75th ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION LOS ANGELES SENTINEL



Entertainment:
Taraji P. Henson

VOL. LXXIII, NO. 52 • 50 Cents + Ca. Sales Tax

"For Seventy-Five Years The Voice of Our Community Speaking for Itself"

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 25 - 31, 2008

AbilityFirst Taps Unlimited Potential



Jason Lewis for Sentinel

There is always a smiling face in Hattie Bell's classroom, where children do their homework, work on art projects, and learn important life skills that they will need as they get older. More children will be able to join the class when the new facility is opened.

BY JASON LEWIS
Sentinel Staff Writer

The Ability First Harry A. Mier Center in Inglewood opened up their doors to residents, local businesses and community leaders during its Holiday Open House to enlighten the community about their programs to support individuals with disabilities and to showcase their plans for their new state of the art facilities.

More than 2,500 children and 2,000 adults with developmental disabilities reside in Inglewood and surrounding areas, many of who stay at home because there are not enough programs for them. Many families wait years to find a facility to assist them in caring for a child or an adult with a developmental or physical disability.

AbilityFirst has been servicing the Inglewood community for over 30 years at the Harry A. Mier Center, but the facilities are not large enough to meet the demand of the area.

The plans call for a new 8,000 square foot multi-use center that will triple the space of the current center. This will allow Ability First to more than double their enrollment for both adults and children.

The new facility will give

AbilityFirst enough space to add more programs, and to run multiple programs at the same time. A commercial-grade kitchen will be used for job training and learning independent living skills.

AbilityFirst plays a vital role in the lives of individuals with disabilities such as autism, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, mental retardation, and other developmental and physical challenges. The programs teach the children and adults life skills and how to be independent.

Hattie Bell, who has been on the staff since 1979, understands that value in helping individuals with disabilities.

"This program is extremely important to the community," Bell said. "We need more places like this. We need a bigger a place, because there are so many people that need this place, but we just do not have the space for them."

Bell has had many fond memories at AbilityFirst. One of her fondest was a child who had hydrocephalus, which causes the head to be enlarged, who doctors said would never be able to walk. But AbilityFirst worked with the child and eventually he was able to walk.

"You just have to believe," Bell

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AbilityFirst {Continued From A-1}



Lori Gangemi, AF President and CEO; Kim Freeman, Regional Director of Community Partnership; Berlinda Fontenot-Jamerson, AF Board Member; Clifton Johnson, VP and Relationship manager-Union Bank of California; Angela Reddock, AF Board Chair; Mordena Moore, AF Board Member; and Christel Mintz, AF Harry A Mier Center Director.

said. "If you believe that it can happen, and you work on it, it will happen."

Another one of Bell's students has made enormous progress as well. Ronisha Penn started in the tykes program, which is ages 3-5. She has grown up in the AbilityFirst program, graduated from North Torrance High School, and now plans to attend Southwest Community College to study child development. Other AbilityFirst students have found employment at

major corporations, such as Directv and Ralphs.

AbilityFirst not only teaches individuals with disabilities life skills, the center is also a place where they can socialize with each other. The children play games with each other, just like any other child. Both the children and adults form bonds and create lasting relationships.

The new facility will cost \$5 million to build, and it will be open in 2011.