

The miracle workers

Looking at the 400 people who came to the Tenderloin Community School Tuesday night to help celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Bay Area Women's and Children's Center, I couldn't help but wish that a few other folks could be there, too.

Folks like Ramon Cortines, the former superintendent of San Francisco Unified School District. In 1990, he listened to the staff of the Women's and Children's Center articulate the critical need for a public grade school in their Tenderloin neighborhood. Impressed by their research and census gathering, Cortines nonetheless said of a new school:

"I don't see this happening."

It would have been fun to see Cortines' successor, Bill Rojas, at the party, as well. After helping the women's center and Tenderloin parents actually get a brand new school built in 1998, Rojas came within hours of selling them out to a for-profit school management corporation that Tenderloin people had already rejected.

When the trio of women that staffs the Women's and Children's Center learned of the scheme and went public with community protest, Rojas reluctantly backed off.

"I just want them to understand the opportunity they're passing up," he'd said.

Tuesday, no one in the Tenderloin School gym was thinking about things lost. There was enough food (all donated) to feed the 7th Fleet. A dynamite video about the Women and Children's Center (kudos to the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund) provided big-screen entertainment. Several students from the school danced



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and sang. One song, "This Land Is Your Land," took on rich meaning: More than 15 languages are spoken by various children in the school.

"It was everything I hoped our anniversary party would be," said Midge Wilson, executive director of the Bay Area Women's and Children's Center. "It reflected what we've been about since day one: community."

Since BAWCC opened at 318 Leavenworth St., it also has been about transformation — of women's and children's lives, of an entire section of a city. As one of 55 women who make up the center's advisory board, I've often said: take BAWCC out of the picture, and San Francisco is in trouble.

Where now there are five kids' playgrounds, there would be dirty sidewalks, scraggly trees and dope pushers. Where now there is a gorgeous grade school and family center — with medical and dental facilities and a rooftop teaching garden — there would be an ugly, under-utilized parking lot.

Scores of college students from the Tenderloin would go without BAWCC scholarships. Babies and their moms would look elsewhere for clothing and diapers. No-income women would try to find job listings

somewhere else.

As the grade school attests, the main product of the Women's and Children's Center is miracles.

Despite what has been wrongly reported of late, Wilson and her center colleagues — Jacky Spencer-Davies and Nancy Ong — spearheaded a stunning fund-raising campaign during the school's construction phase. It netted nearly \$1 million in private money for the family center and other services. Since then, they've pulled in another \$750,000 for, among other things, a school librarian and the library itself.

(Don't get me started on why San Francisco Unified couldn't provide its own school with a library. The first year was so lean, BAWCC accepted books from their neighbor, St. Anthony Foundation.

Another person I wish had made the anniversary party was the late Joe Esherick. An internationally acclaimed architect (he designed the Monterey Aquarium), Esherick fell under the can-do spell of Wilson, Spencer-Davies and Ong in 1993. When they asked him to design the Tenderloin grade school for free, Esherick said what most of us have said for 20 years when anyone from the Women's and Children's Center made a request:

Of course. What do you need?

Esherick never made it inside the completed grade school. But, come to think of it, he was at the anniversary party — in the walls, ceilings, floors and kids' laughter. As I said, the women from BAWCC are used to miracles.

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