

Sorenson festival seeks SLC west-side unity

Community » Demise of Artways casts cloud over Sorenson center.

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Tucked beyond the ruby-red moon bouncer and kids scarfing pink cotton candy, a carefree mural captures the spirit of Salt Lake City's west side.

It depicts kids frolicking amid flowers, tomatoes, birds, bumblebees and a bunny rabbit. And you can't miss the giant red dragonfly, or the green dragon flying overhead.

The dragon is called "the timberjack," said Brianna Ingersoll, clutching a balloon twisted into a parrot. "It's the one that cuts down the trees."

The mural was a highlight Saturday at Sorenson Unity Center's CommUNITY Fair, where 500 people -- mostly from Glendale and Poplar Grove -- ate nachos, watched Brazilian drummers, perused social services booths and worked on kids crafts.

For three months, neighborhood kids have painted the "community garden mural" to reflect what they hope to see on the weed-infested 1.4-acre lot just outside the center. The Unity Center is compiling donations and grant dollars to plant a 25-plot garden, surrounded by trees, on the land, perhaps this summer.



Maria Rodriguez, 3, of Salt Lake City, paints a mural during a community fair Saturday at the Sorenson Unity Center in Salt Lake City. Scores turned out to the 2nd annual Sorenson Unity Center community fair that was a celebration of the diversity community. (Jim Urquhart / The Salt Lake Tribune)

"In Glendale, the only place that's shaded right now is the [Jordan] park," says Angela Romero, Sorenson's program coordinator. "That's what the public asked for, is some more shaded places."

Ten-year-old Nayelli Murillo glances at her mural handiwork while planting peas in a plastic cup. "My favorite part was the painting," she says, remembering that she also helped draw kids in backpacks tossing a football in the mural.

"This is my pride and joy," Sorenson Director Nichol Bourdeaux says about the mural, the kids' "vision" for their community.

On Saturday, resources showered the center. Sponsors provided free yoga classes and glucose tests, while patrons lined up to give their advice on where a library planned for the Glendale area should be located. Polynesian dancers, the drummers of Samba Fogo and the Rubaiyat Belly Dance troupe also took turns performing.

"That's what's unique about Glendale," Romero said, celebrating the fair's diverse sea of families.

But beneath the good spirits, the center's financial challenges hovered like a cloud. In January, the center was transferred from city to Salt Lake County control, displacing longtime employees, volunteers and mentors.

And now, Salt Lake City Mayor Ralph Becker is calling for the elimination of Youth -City Artways to save \$341,000 a year as a means to help plug the city's \$18.8 million budget gap. Artways holds a series of classes, and hosted the mural project, at the center.

"It was an uneducated decision," says Sarah Moyer, who moved from Philadelphia seven years ago to work with Artways. "The devastation is the arts reach kids who aren't interested in other things. As soon as the funding dries up, we don't have the ability to serve these kids. That's the reality."

It also means dozens of teaching artists like Kerri Hopkins could lose their jobs July 1. "It's sad," says the Buffalo, N.Y., transplant who recently bought a home two blocks from the Glendale center. "I was impressed by things happening in Salt Lake. I'm becoming less and less impressed and wondering if I want to stay."

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