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OUT WEST; Door-to-Door Effort Brings a Community Back to Its School

By BARBARA WHITAKER

WHEN Joan Marks became the principal of Carpenter Avenue Elementary School here in 1985, the Los Angeles Unified School District told her that the job might not have much of a future.

"I was basically told the school was on the list to be closed," she said.

Only 459 students were enrolled at the school, which could accommodate nearly twice that number. Of those students, only a fraction lived in this a middle- to upper-middle-class community, named for the movie studios established here during the silent film era. After mandatory busing was instituted in the 1970's, many residents sent their children to private schools.

Ms. Marks, who is now retired, sent herself on a mission to bring the community back to the school. Armed with demographic information, she went door to door, recruiting families with school-age children.

But she had another message for parents, too: "If you enroll your child in this school, you are not just enrolling your child. You are enrolling your family. If you want to help it be a fabulous school, we need to be a team."

Building on that message, the parents who did come formed Parents for Carpenter, a fund-raising organization that hopes to raise close to \$240,000 this year. Comprised entirely of parent volunteers, the group has become integral to the school's success, which now enrolls about 850 children and is considered one of the best public elementary schools in Los Angeles.

In September, the school cut the ribbon on a new library that was built through the efforts of the parents' group. The library project, from its fund-raising beginnings to its final construction, took four years and about \$135,000. That figure, however, does not represent considerable donations of products, services and sweat equity.

Where fund-raising is concerned, the parents are resourceful. They sell everything from T-shirts and hats to advertisements in school publications and tickets to the annual dinner dance and auction. They cultivate the local business community for donations of money, labor and goods. They also sponsor an annual drive in which families are asked to contribute \$500 a child to the school.

"We also say in about the same breath that we know everybody can't do that," said Vince Grant, a parent who coordinates the drive with his wife, Judith Hoag.

They do press parents to give something, even if it is only \$20, Mr. Grant said. "About the highest participation we ever get is 50 to 60 percent, which stuns me because I think these kids really benefit from it," he said.

Most of the money the parents raise helps pay the salaries of teachers that the district cannot

compensate. The group pays for a physical education teacher, a music instructor, the staff in the media center and extra teachers for the fourth and fifth grades. "What we're basically doing is what the school district should do in the first place if they had more money," Mr. Grant said.

Subsidizing schools through parent contributions can be controversial, because some communities can raise more money than others. The Los Angeles Unified School District does not keep records of how much money is generated by individual schools. Eiko Moriyama, the director of partnerships for the school district, said that it was not uncommon for schools to raise money to augment their programs.

"Many of our schools have to do that if they're interested in promoting certain priorities," she said. "It could be science, it could be technology, it could be literacy. Obviously, in our poorer parts of the city it's harder because, in some cases, you're drawing on a populace that can't put food on the table."

To address this inequality, Ms. Moriyama said that the school district cultivated relationships with companies to form partnerships with schools. In addition, she said, many of the less affluent schools receive money through federal entitlement programs.

While many schools have become adept at fund-raising, Carpenter Avenue is particularly well located for the job. It is only a few blocks from Ventura Boulevard, a commercial strip with supermarkets, restaurants, boutiques, banks and offices.

Indeed, many businesses display school supporter certificates in their stores. The school also sells corporate banners acknowledging their support -- for as much as \$2,500 each -- which are hung on a fence on Laurel Canyon Boulevard.

One of the school's most successful corporate relationships is with CBS Studios, which is just down the street, on the lot where Mack Sennett set up a studio in the 20's. In addition to donating money to the school, CBS helps out with building projects. For the new library, it donated carpenters to build bookshelves and seating.

Amy Spach, a parent and a co-chairwoman of the project, said the parents had sought help for the library from many sources. "Some were just blind shots in the dark," said Ms. Spach, a writer and a former producer for the "Today" show. She recalled meeting an executive in an electrical engineering company who ended up providing staff members to create an electrical plan for the library. A call to a home-decorating store produced window shades for the school.

Financing for the library was also raised through a rebate program operated by the Studio City Improvement Association, a group of local businesses. For every \$125,000 in purchases parents made at stores, the school earned \$12,500 from the association.

Mr. Grant said that one aspect to successful fund-raising was educating donors about what their money would be buying. In addition, he said, parents at Carpenter are surveyed annually about how they want their money spent. Equally important, Mr. Grant added, is reminding parents "what happens when they don't give." Ms. Spach said that when soliciting donations for the library, she called attention to the fact that the previous library had books that "referred to space travel as a possibility some time."

That was one of many lessons the parents have learned. When soliciting a gift, Ms. Spach said, "always follow up with a letter." "Always assume it's a gift and treat people kindly," she added. "When in doubt, use the phrase, 'It's for the children.'"

When Joan Marks, the former principal, was asked which was more crucial, donations of money or volunteers, she said, "It has to be a good combination of everything." That concept is now entrenched at Carpenter. Ms. Marks added, "As my husband says, 'You've created a monster.'"