

# The Washington Times

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## 'Dispelling myths' of urban poverty

July 20, 2007

By David C. Lipscomb - When the Town Hall Education, Arts and Recreation Campus in Southeast was conceived by local developer William C. Smith & Co., its purpose was simply to give a blossoming neighborhood a recreation center like others had.

But the idea for THEARC, as it is known, snowballed, and the center unexpectedly became a community sanctuary held up Wednesday by U.S. presidential hopeful Sen. Barack Obama as a vital tool to combat poverty.

Edmund C. Fleet, executive director of the center, said yesterday that the recognition gave him a sense of validation.

"I love dispelling the myths and misconceptions people have about Southeast Washington," he said. "All you hear in the media about Southeast is negative."

Mr. Obama, Illinois Democrat, told Mr. Fleet he heard about the center through D.C. Mayor Adrian M. Fenty. Mr. Obama said during an appearance outside the center Wednesday that if elected president he would spend \$6 billion annually to fight urban poverty and would create similar centers in other cities.



Nancy Pastor/The Washington Times  
A picture titled "I Like to Dance" hangs in the Corcoran Gallery of Art at THEARC in Southeast.

THEARC houses nine resident partners that run independent programs serving about 7,000 people, said spokeswoman Janet Stone. The center offers a free pediatric clinic, free legal aid and social services and free or low-cost dance, art and music classes among other programs.

The center also has a state-of-the-art theater capable of hosting full-scale ballet

productions, Miss Stone said. And the center has put on 130 productions so far this year, compared with 170 during all of last year.

"It's larger than I can probably put into words," said Katrina Joews, director of the Washington Ballet's program at the center. "It's an oasis for people to come here and be in the programs."

Miss Stone said the center offers free or significantly discounted services because the area east of the Anacostia River has been left behind in the city's development boom and needs programs residents can afford.



Phyllis Fleming teaches the violin to Beatrice Smoot, 12, at THEARC. The campus has a theater and it offers a range of free services to the community such as fine arts instruction and medical care. "Everything was built to be high quality," spokeswoman Janet Stone said. "That's part of our mission because people here aren't used to that."

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Staff at the center say that having complimentary services is what makes it successful because people can get multiple affordable services in one place.

"This facility is like no other because we can maximize the services we can offer," said Laura Pasquini, director of the Corcoran Gallery of Art's Artreach program.

THEARC's \$27 million, 110,000-square-foot campus opened on federal land in October 2005, paid for by private donors and federal and D.C. funds, according to the center's Web site.

Building Bridges Across the River, a non-profit co-founded by Smith & Co., acquired a 99-year lease on the land, said spokesman Robert Udowitz.

Each partner pays a percentage of the \$500,000 annual operating cost of the building based on how much of it they occupy.

THEARC started its "One in a Million" campaign in October to raise \$10 million for an endowment that would permanently cover the center's operating costs. It has raised \$1 million to date, Miss Stone said.