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the recking crew

by JOHN SAFIN

Life at the Carlsbad Riverwalk Recreation Complex

Stand on the west side of the bridge that crosses the Pecos River and look across to the east bank. There are two structures that will capture your attention. One is the life size Lincoln Log fort known as Project Playground. The other is a building that combines classic adobe with modern industrial concrete. Together, this is the Carlsbad's Riverwalk Recreation Complex.

It's a short drive from Carlsbad on Greene Street turning north on Muscatel Ave and following the signs to the complex. The 15,000-square foot Project Playground, constructed in 2002, has swings, towers, slides, and mazes that will keep the young and young-at-heart entertained for hours. (The young-at-heart need to know the tube slides work better when waist size is smaller than the diameter of the tube.) This outdoor playground is open from dawn to dusk every day of the year and operated by the City of Carlsbad. There are picnic tables and ramadas near the playground making this an ideal place for a family outing, lunch away from the office, or a romantic picnic.

Walk across the parking lot to the area surrounded by chain link fence to the first of many undiscovered entertainment hubs. The most active section is the skate park; think empty swimming pool with large, curving pillars. Skateboarder, Razor riders, and rollerbladers will recognize the quarter pipes, half pipes, and rails—a source of hours of death-defying fun.

"The skateboarders are crazy," said Elba Alanzo, one of the volunteers at the recreation complex. "They twist, spin, and flip in the air. It's something to watch." She also mentioned the Rec Center has free helmets for anyone who needs it. "We have all the safety equipment and hockey equipment if anyone wants or needs them. We don't charge for the use of the equipment. They just need to leave their ID or keys to borrow what they want."

The monolithic building is where most of the fun happens. The three-floor recreation center has five basketball, two racquetball, and volleyball courts; weight room; video game area; pool tables; a small library filled with all sorts of books, several tables and cushy chairs for relaxation; and a television section. While there is usually someone sitting on the sofa watching television, there seems to be at least one person always shooting hoops.

One evening, there was heavy competition happening on all five basketball courts with each game having its own unique personality. On the near court, Will, Jerzy, and Jordan, three guys who are regulars, were warming up for a game. After watching for a while, it was easy to tell these three guys would give the Harlem Globetrotters a run for their money and they could definitely beat the Washington Generals. There was a 5-on-5 game between guys who looked like they should be playing football instead of basketball and another court had two girls "schooling" two guys in a half-court game. During breaks in the action, several of the players said how grateful they were for the Rec Center. Most wouldn't know what to do without it.

"Many people, especially the kids, express they wouldn't have any place to go to play basketball or a location to meet friends," said Rénee Madrid, manager of the Riverwalk Recreation Complex. "Hundreds of people visit the center every day. Many are from out of town visiting relatives who live here or are tourists who heard about the center."

Wanda Caddel, assistant manager, echoed the comment. "We have a guest book at the entrance, but not everyone signs it when they come to the center. I would say about twenty people a day are from out of town. Several mentioned they would like to duplicate this (recreation center) in their cities."

Meanwhile, two boys playing pool were

"smack talking" to each other, a group was watching a World Cup soccer game, two girls were trying to win a prize from the crane game, two people were playing racquetball, and the Carlsbad Downtown Farmers Market was having a meeting in the center's multipurpose room. This room is available for meetings, birthday parties, or any other type of event. Wedding receptions are one of the most frequent uses for the room. "It's really inexpensive to rent when compared to other places," said Wanda, "There is a covered area at the river just outside the door that is a nice place to take wedding photos."

No matter what time you walk into the Rec Center, there is always something happening, whether it's just the "usual suspects" hanging around or an organized event. Arts and crafts, belly dancing classes, and tea parties are some of the regular activities coordinated by the Rec Center.

"We host special events throughout the year," noted Rénee. "Trick-and-Trunk is a big Halloween event. We give out prizes for the best decorated car and have a lot of games for the kids." She is most proud of the annual Christmas party. Popularity of the holiday party has increased over the years with over 800 people attending last year. "We started doing this about three years ago. Thanks to local business sponsors, this is another event free to the public. Santa is here for photos, we bring in a few inflatable jumpers, and it's a good time for everyone. For our Dr. Seuss party, the community kids made all the posters, and their work was very good. The community service kids do a lot to help us and don't get enough recognition."

At the most recent dance, another routine event at the Rec Center, girls outnumbered boys three to one. The dozen boys were huddled together in a pack protecting each other from actually having to get on the dance floor. It was the "safety in numbers" theory at work. The girls were scattered around



CARLSBAD'S RIVERWALK RECREATION COMPLEX provides activities for youth and adults throughout the year. Many of the regulars at the Rec Center say they wouldn't know what to do without the facility.



ABOVE: Girls from P.R. Leyva and Alta Vista schools enjoy a Rec Center dance. **LEFT:** A young Razor-rider is positioned for a trick while his friend watches.

the area in groups dancing under the strobe lights to the music provided by DJ Chuy, chatting and texting in smaller circles, or spinning glow sticks and giggling...a lot! Finding girls who were willing to talk about the Rec Center wasn't difficult and they all agreed, "It's cool!" Tiersa and Marce, age 12, attend Alta Vista Middle School and like going to the Rec Center to hang with friends. From P.R. Leyva Middle School, Jennica and Jazzmin, 11, and Caitlin, 12, also go there to meet with friends, play foosball, basketball, volleyball, and skateboard. All go to the Rec Center as often as possible, most of them every day. All five were enthusiastic, with overlapping comments including "it's the only place to do stuff" and "more fun than staying home." While all five were talking at the same time, at least two of them said they went there to flirt with the boys. More giggling ensued after this was announced.

This dance happened to be a fundraising event for a local softball team.

According to organizers, charitable groups can rent the Rec Center and hire a DJ, and all the proceeds go to the group. The Rec Center hosts frequent dances throughout the year, including some with a theme, such as a Foam Dance. This is when a giant wading pool is filled with, you guessed it, foam. It's a chance for the kids to have unique fun without overflowing the washing machine at home.

Rénee emphasized, "This is a safe, clean place for kids, adults, and families to have fun. Everything is free except for the video games and some special events. The strange thing is there are people who have lived for thirty years in Carlsbad and never knew we're here. People have called while at Project Playground, just outside the building, to ask where we're located."

The Carlsbad Riverwalk Recreation Complex might be the busiest hidden secret in the area. During the days spent at the Rec Center, it was easy to notice

the 'regulars' and equally amazing to see the dozens of new faces. The staff's estimate that hundreds of people came to the center wasn't that far from the truth.

As wonderful as it is, everyone seemed to want something more at the Riverwalk Recreation Complex. The skateboarders wanted the weather to be cooler, basketball players wanted to make sure it stayed free to play, and the girls wanted computers with Internet access.

"We could use some computers," said Rénee, "but I don't know if Internet access is necessary. Donated computers would allow us to teach the kids typing, have programs for math and reading tutorials, and other teaching tools. More adult volunteers are always welcome."

It's time for you, your family, and your friends to discover fun at the Riverwalk Recreation Complex. Information is available on the City of Carlsbad Website (www.cityofcarlsbadnm.com) or call the center at (575) 887-2702. Now, it's time to get back on the tube slide.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

John Safin has a background in business operations, marketing, event planning, and public relations. Originally from Upstate New York, John moved from Glendale, AZ to Carlsbad, NM, which he now calls "home." www.johnsafin.com