

[Return to Article](#)

Published: Friday, May 2, 2008

'David beats Goliath' in Lincoln Heights After community protests, proposed alcohol-serving restaurant/arcade near schools will become office building.

By R. W. Dellinger

The struggle had dragged on for six years in Lincoln Heights.

Las Villas Inc. wanted to build an alcohol-serving, combo 22,000 square-foot pizza parlor/video arcade that abutted the property of Carmelite Sisters who ran a 65-year-old pre-school, pre-kinder and kindergarten. The proposed structure was literally surrounded by the Sisters' Little Flower Missionary House Child Care Center; Lincoln High School with 2,600 students; and Gates Street Elementary School with an enrollment of 830 students.

During the last year, spearheaded by the efforts of the pastor and parishioners of 121-year-old Sacred Heart Church, meetings and protests were held, petitions were signed, letters were sent and legal actions were taken.

Last Feb. 27, however, all seemed for naught in the protracted community-vs.-business conflict. That's when the East Los Angeles Area Planning Commission, after an eight-hour public hearing of mostly passionate pleas from parents, voted 2-to-1 to deny the nuns' and community's appeal against the video arcade along with the sale of beer and wine in the pizza parlor.

The overflow crowd had asked the commission to simply uphold a city ordinance prohibiting the sale of alcohol 500 feet from a school or religious institution. The project had been granted numerous variances, including one from the alcohol-distance ordinance.

But on April 15, the struggle took an unexpected left turn when Alice Corona, president of Las Villas Inc., sent a letter to the planning commission asking for a "change of use" from the proposed restaurant-entertainment center to a commercial office building. In doing so, she withdrew her request for a permit to sell beer and wine, plus the zone variance to have a video arcade.

David had once again beaten Goliath.

Voice of the people prevail

"I think every letter, every meeting you attended, every protest you attended, every phone call you made has paid off. So give yourselves a big hand. Because it wasn't easy," Father Mario Torres, Sacred Heart's pastor, told more than 100 Lincoln Heights residents at an April 23 outdoor evening press conference and fiesta in the church's small plaza.

"The reason I called this press conference is because I really wanted to show everybody that this is your victory," the 39-year-old priest continued. "Because no politician supported us. No one helped us. It was you, the voice of the people, who came through. And it's a big accomplishment."

Father Torres thanked the media, including The Tidings, for "getting our message out." He also recognized people outside the community who contacted City Council members after learning of the beer-selling pizza arcade near the schools.

"This sends a message of hope not only to Lincoln Heights but to all of L.A.," he said. "There's many injustices going on in L.A., and what we learned from this is that when we come together and unite we can overcome a lot of things. Because the voice of the people is something they cannot ignore."

Sister Vincent Marie Finnegan of the Little Flower Missionary House off North Broadway thanked Father Torres and his parishioners for supporting the Carmelite Sisters of the Most Sacred Heart of Los Angeles.

"We have loved and served this community for 65 years," she noted. "We know many of your children and your grandchildren. So from beginning to end, this whole project has been about the children. There's over 3,000 students who are on the three corners [of the site]. So we are delighted the owners changed their mind."

Robert Vega, a parish leader, parent and graduate of Lincoln High School, said he found it very disturbing that the property owners wanted to put an entertainment center that sold alcohol right in the center of three schools.

"That was wrong," he declared. "So for all of us to speak as one is very - how would I put it - it's a great feeling of faith that we can put our energy together the way we did. You know, in Spanish they use the phrase 'Si Se Puede' [Yes we can]. Here it's 'Si se Hizo' [We did it]."

The last parishioner to speak was Kimberly Ruano, a seventh-grader at Sacred Heart Elementary School. The 13-year-old said she got involved against the Las Villas project because she was "in disagreement" with selling alcohol next to schools and also having a video arcade nearby. Both would keep teenagers from studying.

"What I learned from this was that when you want to reach a goal you never give up, and if you need help ask for it and you will be able to reach your goal," she said. "I will never forget this special lesson I have learned. I thank Father Mario and everybody else who helped us to accomplish this."

Appeal denied

Father Torres told The Tidings that he was surprised by the decision and especially happy for the Carmelite Sisters, who could now continue to have the serenity to pray along with a safe environment for the children they care for and educate. "Everything was going against us," he said. "The appeal was denied. But the people didn't give up. We took it to prayer and vigil.

"I think it was the pressure from people in the community and others outside Lincoln Heights," he added. "LA Voice helped us organize, too. The message spread throughout the archdiocese. But I just thank God for this great victory. I told the people, it was like David against Goliath."

Sister Finnegan didn't know what made the Las Villas owners decide to put up an office building instead of a pizza parlor and video arcade. All she knew was that Carmelite sisters from coast to coast had prayed and prayed.

"People may laugh, but I won't laugh," she mused. "We've been praying very hard through the intercession of Pope John Paul II - because he loved children - that there would be a peaceful and quick resolution to this. And, you know, God hears the prayers of the people."

Retired after 30 years of working for the City of Los Angeles' Department of Water and Power, Frank

Serrano was well aware of how difficult it was to fight City Hall. But the 57-year-old graduate of Sacred Heart Elementary School never lost hope.

"I didn't give up and the community didn't give up," he confided. "We kept fighting. No video games. No alcohol near schools. That was what we fought for. This is a victory for what's right is right."

[Home](#) | [News](#) | [Spirituality](#) | [Sports](#) | [Calendar](#) | [Entertainment](#) | [Liturgy](#) | [Viewpoints](#)
[About](#) | [Contact](#) | [Departments](#) | [Home Delivery](#)

copyright The Tidings Corporation ©2004

Contact us at: info@the-tidings.com