

Pilgrim House

Pilgrim House came into existence in September 1943, through the efforts of the special Little Tokyo Committee, which was part of the Welfare Council of Metropolitan Los Angeles, the Social Service Department of Los Angeles County.

The Little Tokyo Committee felt a community-based center was needed to provide social service assistance to the thousands of African Americans crowding into the Bronzeville/Little Tokyo district.

The committee secured space at 120 North San Pedro Street, the prewar Japanese Union Church building, which currently houses the Union Center for the Arts. Like other Little Tokyo temples and churches during the war, the Union Church building was also a temporary storage place for the belongings of evicted Japanese Americans.

During the early stages of Pilgrim House, the city's Bureau of Public Assistance temporarily lent a case worker, and the city Playground and Recreation Department provided two workers.

In February 1944, the Rev. Harold Merrybright Kingsley, a nationally-known African American minister from the Church of Good Shepherd in Chicago, was named Pilgrim House executive director.

The Los Angeles Presbytery and the Congregational Conference of Southern California owned the 120 North San Pedro building, and funded a large part of Pilgrim House's budget.

Pilgrim House provided the new African American migrants with a number of social services including health, sanitation, education, housing and employment referrals.

Pilgrim House activities included a nursery school; Boy Scout and Cub Scout troops; a basketball team; ceramics classes; luncheons; counseling; playground space; a toy loan program; meeting space for various organizations; free immunization service through the city Health Department; play performances; and off-site camping activities.

Pilgrim House also organized an interracial summer "Vacation Plan," where Christian homes hosted children of other nationalities to be their guests for one week. Caucasian, African American, Latino American and later Japanese American children participated in this program.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chose to have their June 4, 1944 public meeting at Pilgrim House so that members could get acquainted with the new residents of Bronzeville/Little Tokyo.

Elizabeth Hardy and Arthur Bacon oversaw Pilgrim House's Bronzeville Playground, under the direction of the city Playground and Recreation Department. The playground, located at the back of Pilgrim House, attracted more than 60 children when it held its first party in August 1944.

Bacon also served as coach of Pilgrim House's Bronzeville Recreation Basketball team and scoutmaster for Boy Scout Troop 731, sponsored by the Golden State Life Insurance Co., which had a Bronzeville office at 104 South San Pedro Street.

Dr. Glen Lukens, a ceramics professor at the University of Southern California, headed Pilgrim House's ceramics department, started by the Alpha Gamma Omega chapter of the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority. In September 1944, Pilgrim House, through the efforts of Luken, purchased a kiln.

Pilgrim House ceramics students staged several exhibits, where they sold their creations.

The local chapter of the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority unveiled a library inside Pilgrim House on July 16, 1944. The library featured books and periodicals on African Americans and race relations, and children's books. The library reading center also offered story hours for children.

In September 1944, Pilgrim House, with the help of First Street Baptist Church and the New Jerusalem Baptist Church, successfully prevented a liquor store from opening up about 100 feet from the social service agency. Los Angeles County Supervisor John Anson Ford, whose district included Bronzeville/Little Tokyo, also supported Pilgrim House's efforts and sent in a letter to the Board of Equalization, dated Sept. 14, 1944.

Ford wrote in part: "We sincerely regret that an excessive number of liquor stores have been licensed in this area. The number is far in excess of what could be supported by this locality. In consequence, liquor dealers, with or without added entertainment attractions, are undertaking to sustain their businesses by drawing amusement seekers from other parts of the city...The special purpose of this letter is to earnestly appeal to you to deny a license for liquor selling."

By the summer of 1945, Bronzeville and the Central Avenue area had so many liquor stores that the California Eagle published a July 19, 1945 editorial calling for a stop to liquor stores, noting that "in some blocks, there are three or four

liquor stores."

When the United States government started allowing Japanese Americans to return to the West Coast, Pilgrim House formed the Common Ground Committee in 1945 to help promote a favorable atmosphere for returning Japanese Americans and to foster positive racial interaction among the African Americans, Japanese Americans and Latino Americans in the area.

During this time, Pilgrim House and returning Union Church members shared the 120 North San Pedro building space. As the Japanese Americans started to ease back into the area, Union Church began holding services and Japanese language classes at the building. The following Union Church members also served on the Pilgrim House board: Rev. Sohei Kowta, Rev. Arnold Nakajima, Rev. Seido Ogawa and Chikashi Tanaka.

When the war ended in August 1945, war industry jobs dried up and many African American war workers found themselves being laid off. By 1947, Pilgrim House board minutes indicated that fewer children were attending their nursery school as more laid off women had time to look after their children.

By November 1947, the owners of the building - the Los Angeles Presbytery and the Southern California Congregational Conference - voted to return the building to Union Church members. Pilgrim House did not challenge the action and began a search for a new space.

At a Dec. 17, 1947 board meeting, a special committee agreed that "the building belongs to the Japanese Church and should be returned to them in accordance with the original understanding." The African American news media was contacted to quell any false perception that Pilgrim House was being forced out.

On Sept. 1, 1948, Pilgrim House relocated to 150 North Los Angeles Street, which was also home to a Filipino center and church. The two institutions shared the space and staggered room use.

No sooner had Pilgrim House made the move, however, then they received notice in 1949 that the 150 North Los Angeles building was targeted for demolition to make way for Parker Center, the new Los Angeles Police Department headquarter. Pilgrim House, which had spent close to \$4,000 on building improvement, was initially told to move out by Dec. 31, 1949 but was able to get an extension until Sept. 1, 1950.

A June 2, 1950 board minutes reported that although African American families were moving out of the area, Pilgrim House still had 50 to 75 children using their facilities daily. A month later in July 1950, the minutes noted that children using the Pilgrim House facilities were down to between 30 and 50. This was in contrast to the average of about 150 children who had attended Pilgrim House at their peak.

On July 6, 1950, Kingsley wrote to Dr. James McCandless of the Welfare Council, notifying him that Pilgrim House was converting to a decentralized program while they sought a new location.

In the fall of 1950, the Pilgrim House board voted to terminate the organization on Oct. 16, 1950. A closing service was conducted on Oct. 15 at their final location at 600 East First Street.