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One old base where Hope is realized

Two Orange County Marine Corps bases have closed within the last several years. The civilian managers of one have spent about \$100 million of the public's money and so far have a giant airborne orange goiter to show for it. The civilian managers of one slice of another have spent mostly private money and have produced something that actually benefits mankind.

I toured the 5-acre piece of the former Tustin helicopter base they now call the Village of Hope. It was the Friday night before last, the night the Pacific Symphony and the Pacific Choral performed the premier of "From Greater Light," a piece commissioned by **Howard and Roberta Ahmanson** just for this occasion. There was a black-tie dinner and concert the next night at The Segerstrom, but the organizers wisely decided to first play it for the people it was written for: the homeless.

I'd been told by others who'd toured the Village of Hope to expect to be dazzled. I've heard that before and been disappointed.

But from the moment I passed through the Village's handmade iron gates – four tons of pivoting artwork created by sculptor **Albert Paley**, and also commissioned by the Ahmansons – my jaw dropped literally or figuratively about once every five minutes.

The idea, said board President **Jim Palmer**, who was guiding me around, is that there's no reason the homeless shouldn't be surrounded by beauty – that it is inspirational for the soul. The soul that inspires one to get off his butt and better himself (my phrasing) and also to develop a relationship with God.

I don't know that the faith-based model for public works is applicable in every situation and environment. I just know it seems to be working in this one, and the contrast between it and the moribund Great Park project down the road at the old El Toro base couldn't be more clear.

Palmer sits on the Tustin City Council – although he was involved in planning the Village of Hope long before he took office in 2006.

He has created the most comprehensive facility for homeless families in the United States. The \$20 million to build it was raised privately. There's no debt. Palmer, through sheer focus, willed the Village of Hope into existence.

Larry Agran has been on the Irvine City Council more than 20 years. He feels the need to plan the whole damn Great Park down to the last diaper-changing station before he's willing to lay sod for one stinking soccer field.

A little tour: Basically, Palmer has taken two old barracks, refurbished them into two sides of a quad that, with the artwork and banks of new construction, resembles nothing so much as a college campus.

Besides the Paley sculptures, there's paintings of early California landscapes donated or on loan, a 16-foot-tall ceramic jar featuring images of the Twelve Apostles in bas-relief and a chapel with lovely stained-glass windows. (While the Village is nondenominational and Jewish organizations and others donate money and time, it skews heavily Christian.)

There's a check-in area, where families are interviewed and have backgrounds run for criminal histories; an institutional kitchen designed by the Cheesecake Factory; a clinic that provides medical, dental and optical services; a play center (one-third of residents are kids) with fun murals on the walls; a "pirate ship" to romp on; and carpets in a deep green shag that are the closest thing to soft indoor sod you can get. Homeless kids will find more to do here than other O.C. kids can find at the Great Park.

A total of 192 people can live in the 144 rooms, each of which was put together by a different designer donating his or her talents. They aren't Four Seasons, but they aren't Motel 6 either. I'd take one.

"A strange thing happened the first day we opened," Palmer told me. "Usually people ask for movie passes or coupons for McDonald's, but within five hours people were asking, 'Hey, can we take classes at the college? What if I want to be a landscape architect?'"

"And we asked, 'What's different?' And they said, 'It's this place. It's like a campus.' We're seeing this increase in desire for self-improvement."

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