

# Fitness area opens in Ventura's Westpark Community Center



ROB VARELA/THE STAR Paul Iniguez hits a speed bag in the Westpark Community Center's fitness area in Ventura on Tuesday.



ROB VARELA/THE STAR Instructor Sal Flores works with Emiliano Soto-Garcia as he teaches a boxing class for youths in the Westpark Community Center's fitness area in Ventura on Tuesday.



ROB VARELA/THE STAR Dafne Perez hits a heavy bag as she works out in the Westpark Community Center's fitness area in Ventura on Tuesday.



ROB VARELA/THE STAR Abram Ortiz (center) and his brother Jason (left) look up at a TV screen and follow along as they and other youths take a Zumba dance class at the Westpark Community Center in Ventura on Tuesday.

By Anne Kallas, Special to The Star

In the middle of enthusiastically hitting a punching bag at the Westpark Community Center in Ventura, 16-year-old Fenix Valle stopped momentarily to reflect.

"This place is probably one of the best things that's happened to me. I've made new friends," Valle said of the center before returning to his workout. "And this is a stress reliever. It's a place to let out my anger and emotions."

The new Westpark Community Center fitness area officially opened Tuesday with the presentation of a \$10,000 check from Aera Energy, which helped build and equip it. It was immediately popular with a group of teens who started to work out using the punching bags and other fitness equipment.

Ventura Youth Programs Coordinator Anita Diaz, who has been the center director for more than 10 years, said the fitness area will be used for martial arts classes, step classes and "anything to keep people active. We're hoping the kids will bring their parents in to join them in classes to offer fitness for the whole family."

Judy Devine, the city's Community Recreation Division manager, said the Westpark Center has benefited from numerous grants that provide services for children on Ventura's west side.

"Through these grants, we've been rebuilding Westpark," Devine said. "Without the center, most of these kids would be home alone after school."

Diaz called the center "a safe haven where kids can come to get their homework done and interact with their peers in a positive way."

Michele Newell of Aera Energy said the latest Westpark project was a "no-brainer."

"This is great opportunity we couldn't pass up," Newell said, noting that Aera Energy is active in the west Ventura area. "Westpark serves a large number of families and children in that area. This is the best way for us to impact lives. It's a real tangible way to give back to the community."

For Micah Barnett, 10, the center is a place where he can pursue his love of performance and dance.

"I come here every day. My mom and stepdad have to work and can't watch us kids," Micah said. "I'm

the only boy in the dance class, and I volunteered to help teach those dance moves."

Ventura Police Chief Ken Corney said he supports the center, which has a Police Activities League program that is also sponsored by Aera Energy.

"It's all about how it looks," Corney said, calling Westpark "safe, inviting and well-staffed. The best crime prevention is to have youth programs in areas that are economically and geographically challenged."

Westpark offers a computer lab, art and music studios, game and teen rooms, and a kitchen that serves free snacks and dinner funded by a U.S. Department of Agriculture food grant. It is also the site of a free monthly FOOD Share food distribution program for nearby residents.

There are Program Enrichment for After-School Kids programs; sports fields for soccer, basketball and football leagues; and a gymnasium for weekend and evening adult leagues.

"I don't believe we would be as successful without the various community partnerships — from Aera to the Lions Club. All the little pieces come together," Devine said.

Mark Varela, Ventura County chief probation officer, said the center helps children have happy childhoods.

"Kids, like anybody else, have basic needs," he said. "They want to be accepted — to go to a location with caring people. This center gives kids resources that allows them to feel cared about."

"I think it's fantastic that they have an indoor gym that will offer fitness activities. I'm very impressed with how we've kept up as a community."

Isabella Bonilla, 8, was playing in an outside area that offers various games, such as four-square, blocks and a giant Connect Four game.

"I come here all the time," she said. "It's a fun place to go where they let me do my homework. They give us meals and there is fun stuff to do. If I didn't come here I would have to stay at home — bored."

Learn more: For information about the Westpark Community Center, 450 W. Harrison Ave., call 648-1895 or visit <http://www.cityofventura.net/westpark>.