

# County DIGEST



JUNE 17, 1996

COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES



## Island of Learning

Six-year-old Scott Messamore wandered around his new school, full of excitement. After all, it was full of adults, a rare scene on a regular school day. His father, Chief Administrative Office employee Alan Messamore, was nearby, describing how the school began and the many advantages for County employees who want a safe, personal environment for their young children to learn.

All of this activity took place on a small, fenced-in patch of the south campus of Rancho Los Amigos Medical Center in Downey, where the Rancho Los Amigos Primary School opened its doors for business. Opening ceremonies were held on May 9, with a ribbon-cutting, a walk-through tour of

See "Rancho Primary School," page four



**SCHOOL'S IN SESSION:** Celebrating the opening of the Rancho Los Amigos Primary School is (l-r) Diane Mesa, Administrative Liaison; Alan Messamore, Chief Administrative Office (and parent); Karen Wunch, R.N., Chief Nursing Officer, Rancho Los Amigos Medical Center; Barbara Schutte, president of the Child Development Consortium of Los Angeles; and Tim Adams, Courts employee and chair of the School's Parent-Teacher Involvement Group.



Cynthia Aguirre-Illman receives a scroll of commendation from Board Chairman Michael Antonovich.

### Employee of the Month

## Cynthia Aguirre-Illman: Compassionate Advocate for Children

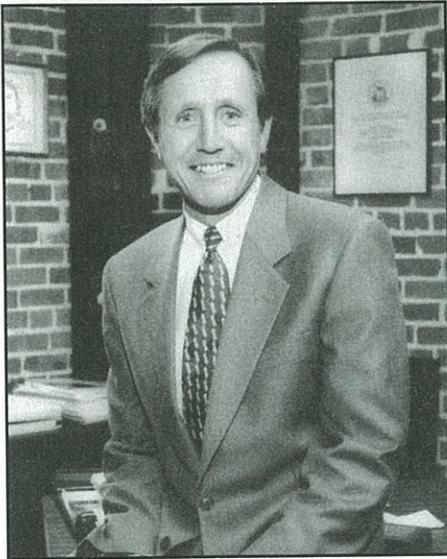
She comes home every evening to her quiet home in Riverside, where a calming lakeside view helps her "recharge" for the next day. As a children's social worker for the Department of Children and Family Services' Belvedere office, 38-year-old Cynthia Aguirre-Illman spends her days patching up families torn apart by substance abuse and negligent parenting. At the end of each day, she's drained.

In contrast, she's happily married to attorney Barry Illman and, together, they share a comfortable home life with two dogs, two cats, and two incomes. But tears flow easily when Aguirre-Illman recalls the memory of her father placing cardboard inside his shoes to cover the holes. She remembers what it's like to be one of the

See "Aguirre-Illman," page three

# Meet Mark Finucane

## New Director of Health Services



Mark Finucane

Like Lady Liberty's famous creed, the County's Health Services Department has given out the same message since 1878: "Bring me your poor, your sick." After 118 years of healing L.A.'s indigent population, the County's safety net has unraveled. Hundreds of millions of dollars in debt, the department itself has fallen into its own fiscal crisis of staying alive.

Into this scenario walked Mark Finucane on January 16, 1996, after spending 12 years as Health Services Director of Contra Costa County. The first time he applied for this job, the Board chose his predecessor, former director Robert Gates. This time, however, they selected Finucane, for the now greater challenge to repair Health Services, a department deeply damaged by financial woes that almost tipped the County into bankruptcy last summer. History-making layoffs of more than 3,000 staff just months before his arrival gave birth to a demoralized workforce suffering from post-layoff blues.

Confident and singular in focus, Finucane is in for the long haul, calling the Board's commitment to changing the Department "unparalleled." Now he's been given the chance to do what he wanted to more than a decade ago,

and he's ready.

"When I first came in January, I gave myself 90 days — 60 days to get a sense of the organization and its capabilities, and 30 days to restructure the overall department," he says. Although that hasn't occurred, Finucane has made it a point to spend a great deal of time introducing himself to staff at each of the hospitals and clinics through his "Meet the Director" forums. He's amazed at some of the responses he's received.

"Employees were appreciative for crediting them for their work with our patients," he explains.

Finucane admits that some of the changes may be painful for County health workers who are used to "the old way of doing business." With the Department's strategic plan to move into managed care, Finucane realizes that employees "don't grasp managed care." It will be an adjustment for hospital-based caregivers to move into an ambulatory atmosphere of health prevention and maintenance. He estimates that inpatient care will be reduced by approximately one-third of its current service level, without closing any of the system's six hospitals.

"Before we close any hospitals, we need to see the hospitals change, becoming smaller institutions with a shorter length of stay for patients," Finucane says. "

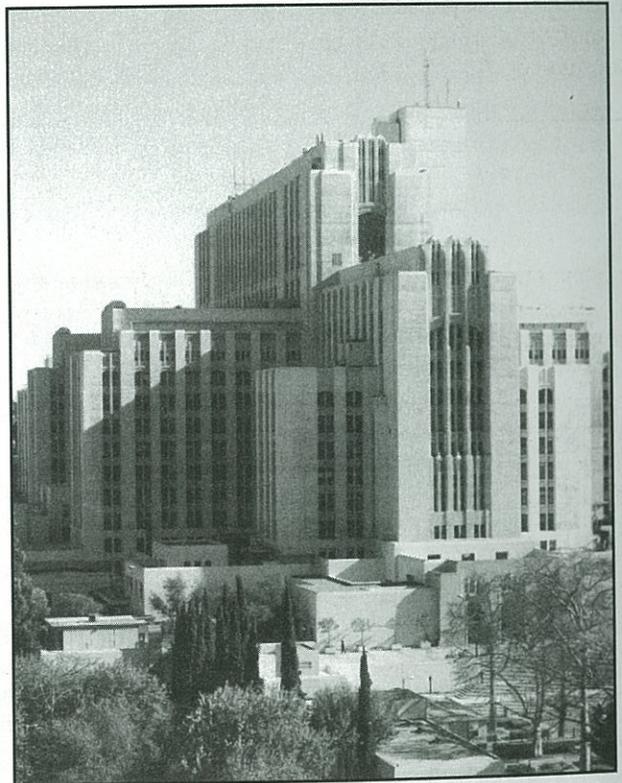
When former CAO Sally Reed proposed the closure of "County General," as it is known in the community, headlines plastered with community outcries were only outnumbered by the caravans of protestors, including doctors, nurses, and community residents, who became weekly fixtures in the Board of Supervi-

sors hearing room downtown. With so much pressure to replace the hospital, at the top of Finucane's capital projects "A List" is the plan for reconfiguring the replacement hospital for the LAC+USC Medical Center.

"The new hospital will be built, but it will be a much smaller inpatient facility than originally designed," says Finucane. "We want our patient care programs to move out into the communities."

Finucane also plans to hire two key players to help direct the department's new course, including an associate director for clinical and medical staff affairs, and a director of the Office of Managed Care. Together, with other key staff across the Department, Finucane plans to get the restructured Department off and flying soon.

"We've run out of runway. We're going to take off...I don't care about how many seats we have left. We've



The replacement of the aging LAC+USC Medical Center in Boyle Heights is one of the core projects on Finucane's "A List." It is considered to be the flagship of the County's hospital system.

got to make this happen," he says, vowing to regain the public's trust and employee morale. "We're all under the gun, no matter how visible our positions are or aren't."

Highlighting the County's 1996 Volunteer Awards ceremonies, television personality Stephanie Edwards enthusiastically welcomed 45 youth and adult volunteers to "center stage" during a special luncheon at the Music Center's Grand Hall.

Opening the program with a song titled "Children Around the World," the Assistance League's Kinderchorus thrilled the audience with a lively performance and stunning national costumes. Delivering the keynote speech, Supervisor Mike Antonovich stated, "This year's theme, 'Explore the Wonder,' reminds us of the excitement and amazement which volunteers experience when they first join a public service program."

The excitement generated by the honorees, culminated with the announcement of the three Countywide Volunteers of the Year. Noemi Sifuentes, recipient of the County Youth Award was described as a dynamic role model in the Probation Department's Afterschool Counseling Program. Gretchen Sibley, recipient of the Countywide Adult Award was honored

## Volunteers Explore the Wonder



**THE LUCKY WINNERS:** Board Charman Michael Antonovich and Mistress of Ceremonies, television personality Stephanie Edwards, congratulate this year's winners, (l-r) Gretchen Sibley, Noemi Sifuentes and Mario Machado.

for her exceptional volunteer work with the Museum of Natural History's research archive projects. In addition, the judges were so impressed with Mario Machado's generosity of spirit and long-term commitment to public service that they honored him with the rarely presented County Humanitarian of the Year

Award. Machado is an Emmy-Award winning television broadcaster and producer.

For more information about volunteering for a County program, contact Marjorie Edmondson, Countywide Program Manager, at (213) 974-2466.

## Aguirre-Illman *(continued from page one)*

families she now works hard to heal.

Each day, she silently tucks that memory into her pocket as she heads for work. Her fear of returning to those days keeps her focused.

"Something unfortunate could knock you off your perch anytime. You never know what could happen," she says.

Aguirre-Illman was honored for her skills as a social worker on May 28 as the May 1996 County Employee of the Month. During the past year, she has found permanent adoptive homes for 26 children, compared to the average 10 to 12 cases. She was able to accomplish this while still managing a caseload of 58 children and families.

Her father stood nearby, beaming with pride, as Aguirre-Illman was handed a scroll of commendation from Board Chairman Michael Antonovich. Together with her mother, sister, and husband, she accepted the honor with that same inspired humility.

While enrolled in nursing school,

Aguirre-Illman decided to become a social worker when she realized that she wasn't cut out for the "guts and anatomy" part of that profession. Her nurturing personality was what prompted her career counselor to suggest social work.

"I spent time researching positions where my strengths would show. I like helping children, and this occupation was a good match," she says.

Aguirre-Illman's first day on the job was on December 30, 1986, working with a skeleton crew the day before New Year's Eve. Co-workers thought she was an auditor, as she spent her first days combing through boxes of case background files. In 1994, she joined the Adoptions Unit in the Belvedere office, where she continues her work with the children.

"My clients say that I'm genuine," she says, crediting her loving parents and humble beginnings. "My parents grounded me. They placed education first and made many sacrifices for me.

I know I'm very blessed."

Hard times helped Aguirre-Illman bring a special talent to the job because she can easily understand the circumstances which can lead to abuse and break-up of the family unit.

"I understand my cases because I'm not far from that. I could be there," she admits. "The children in these homes are the product of a bad situation. We always try to unify the family, but when that's not possible, that's when I come in. The Adoptions Unit is the backbone of the system."

Aguirre-Illman knows that she is changing history for many families. Her compassionate heart goes out to them, reserving judgment for others. She carries around another piece of information each day while on the job — good advice from her college professor and mentor, Dr. James Bush, about serving clients as a social worker: "Do no damage."

# DPSS Toy Loan Program Needs Donations



Don't forget...June is the Department of Public Social Services Toy Loan fundraising month. New and used toys of all types are needed to help keep the program going. Much like a library, the program enables children to "check out" toys for playtime enjoyment. To find out how to donate your new and used toys to the Toy Loan Program, call (213) 226-6286.

## Rancho Primary School

(continued from page one)

the school, and tables of fresh baked goods for well-wishers to nibble on.

The school is housed in two small clapboard frame structures dating back to 1924 which once served as cottages for residents of Rancho, formerly known as the Los Angeles County Farm for the poor. Now it is an island of learning.

The idea of opening a primary school stemmed from employees who had been bringing their children to the Rancho Los Amigos Children's Center, which opened in the fall of 1994, and continues to provide infant, toddler, preschool care and kindergarten classes.

"As the children began to outgrow the preschool program, some of the parents began to wonder how they could keep bringing them here," says Barbara Schutte, president of the Child Development Consortium of Los Angeles, operators of the school and several other County-sponsored child care centers. "Many of the children have been in the program since infancy."

Believed to be the first of its type at any of the approved day care and pre-school facilities devoted to providing quality child care for families of County employees, the Primary School provides a classroom environment for grades one through three. With a current enrollment of 24, well below the average in overcrowded public elementary classes, the mixed age groups provide for a "one room school-house" style of teaching. Schutte says it's becoming popular again.

"With a range of ages, the kids have been able to be more personally involved, even in the creation of the school," she says. "It's had a positive impact on social and learning behaviors as well, because the kids feel like it's a safe place where they're respected."

Plans to expand the school into the adjacent building will allow the enrollment to reach an ultimate 60 students. With no room left at the long line of coatrack hooks which greet the students each morning, the new expansion will not come too soon.

## This Month's Retirees

Congratulations to the following employees who are retiring after 30 or more years of service to the people of Los Angeles County:

**Auditor-Controller:** Clearther Taylor

**Beaches and Harbors:** Irene Machuca

**Fire:** Arnold L. Carter, William H. Robb, Jr.

**Health Services:** Barbara J. Banks, Albert L. Bussard, Edgar L. Davis, William A. Delgado, Flora M. Fort, Bessie M. Green, Edward Lee, Virginia Maestrini, Angelo N. Malkos, Carrie J. Napier, Lena J. Russell

**Public Social Services:** Charlotte Z. Thompkins

**Public Works:** Joseph W. Fellick

**Sheriff:** Willie B. Armstead, Jr., Ronald C. Black, Dale G. Christiansen, Horace J. Freeland, David H. Kading, Gerard P. McCune, William E. Montgomery, Roger E. Nicodemus, Arvie L. Sherman

Congratulations to the following employees who are retiring after serving the County for 25-30 years:

**Board of Supervisors:** Kay K. Johnson

**Community and Senior Services:** Catherine T. Garamella

**District Attorney:** Doris J. Lomax, Pauline V. Perez

**Health Services:** Wealtha Buchanan, Theodore L. Ebenkamp, Catherine Gibson, Ramona J. Thompson, Ruby Wheeler, Thomas Yoshida

**Human Relations Commission:** Lionel Martinez

**Internal Services:** Kenneth J. Glover, Ray M. Martinez, Richard C. Sloan

**Municipal Court:** Fern Whelan

**Public Library:** Thelma M. Murray

**Public Social Services:** Mildred C. Cummings, Frederick R. Ramirez, Melissa Williams

**Sheriff:** Terry E. Gingerich

## County DIGEST

### Members of the Board

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