

GOOD NEWS for...

CIVIC CENTER With “boarded up” becoming the status quo for more and more central city buildings, it’s really fine news that the old Federal Office Building on U.N. Plaza, shuttered since 2007, will be upgraded with \$121 million in stimulus funds. GSA regional offices housed at 450 Golden Gate will move into the new digs in about six years. The 1936 Beaux Arts building will get a seismic upgrade, and new heating and electrical systems. The plaza itself got a small makeover in 2005 with a \$1 million federal Department of Transportation grant that attempted to resolve some problems uncovered by a U.N. Plaza Working Group — gang activity, garbage pileups, drug sales, a homeless gathering place. The fountain, designed by landscape architect Lawrence Halprin, came in for a lot of criticism, was threatened with demolition, is fenced off, then unfenced off. Today, crime is down in the plaza, legal activity is up and just plain folks also sit around the fountain, which must please Halprin. In 2004, he told the York Times Times the plaza needed to be saved: “The U.N. needs strengthening all around the block. The first thing is to get the hell out of Iraq. The second thing to do is this.”

TAYLOR STREET Eight laurel trees now gracing Taylor Street were surplus from DPW’s Polk Street Streetscape Improvements project that began May 1. Scheduled to be completed by August and stretching from Turk to Sacramento streets, the Polk Street project will replace 22 unhealthy trees and add another 120 — for a total of 37 queen palms, 72 magnolias and 33 cherry trees, some in planters and some planted in the sidewalks. With funding for the \$1 million project from a federal Department of Transportation grant and matching city funds, the project also calls for replacing all the “cobrahead” streetlights with more historic-looking fixtures.



WOMEN IN THE HOOD Alliance for a Better District 6 has opened applications for its Women of the Year Awards, a new initiative to recognize District 6 women who have a passion for community service and have championed causes in six categories: youth, seniors, health, arts and media, education and community development. Anyone can nominate candidates for the awards, which will be announced in October, by going to the Website womenoftheyear.cfsites.org and submitting a resume, bio and contact information by Aug. 31. Nominees must live in District 6 and have done significant work in one of the six categories. Winners will receive a Certificate Award issued by a state or city office.

THEATER LOVERS EXIT Theatre is poised to expand its innovative, live, year-round offerings: May 1 it signed a lease for the next-door storefront at 156 Eddy, a 1,700-square-foot space where it will build a 49-seat theater, its fifth performance venue in the Tenderloin. Renovations should be complete by the end of 2010. “EXIT Theatre will present 646 performances this season,” said Richard Livingston, EXIT co-founder and managing director since it opened 26 years ago. “That’s up 49% from last year, so we can serve more independent theater companies producing mostly new work.” Besides the 80-seat main stage at 156 Eddy, EXIT operates the 49-seat EXIT Stage Left and EXIT Café, which can hold 35 seats and also serves food and drink. Around the corner is the 66-seat EXIT on Taylor, 277 Taylor. “The new space will double the street frontage, providing more impact on Eddy Street,” Livingston said. Info on EXIT Theatre’s scheduled productions: www.theexit.org.

GREEN THUMBS OF BOEDDEKER PARK Dozens of old-timers from Presentation Senior Community and the Friends of Boeddeker Park were presented a 2009 Community Hero Award May 2 by the Crissy Field Center in the Presidio. The award recognizes groups that protect and restore community environments. Aided by Rec and Park since 2003, the Friends have worked with volunteers from Presentation next door to transform and beautify Boeddeker. They meet on the third Saturday morning of each month and work three hours. The average Presentation volunteer’s age is 80 and most are Chinese. Their enthusiasm for working outside with their hands in flower beds is remarkable. Even some with disabilities work. “Rosemary and sage replace the needles and syringes that once littered the garden beds,” the center’s Website says of their work. “It helps them stay healthy and I hope they’ll motivate others,” said Friends Chair Betty Traynor. For the award ceremony, the center sent two vans to Presentation to drive 18 seniors to Crissy Field. A video exhibit at the center showcases the winners and describes their contributions.



Betty Traynor (left) and Presentation staffers Paul Lam and Abelle Cochico hold awards.

If you have some good news, send it to tom@studycenter.org or marjorie@studycenter.org

Mental Health Gala nets \$60,000

BY A. ALBERTO CASTILLO ABELLO

IT was a wonderful evening at the Mental Health Association’s Annual Awards Gala May 13 — a silent auction, food, drinks and happy faces everywhere. The event raised just under \$60,000 for MHASF.

Jeff Bell, KCBS radio personality, opened the evening describing his personal experience with mental illness. Bell then introduced MHA Executive Director Belinda Lyons, who presented the Champion Award to James Keys, longtime central city mental health advocate, and the Foundation Leader Award to the van Löben Sels/RembeRock Foundation, recognized for its decades of commitment to mental health. There was a special tribute to late Judge Herbert Donaldson for his lifelong contributions.

way he could work or be in the movie was if he signed a waiver. It stated that if his mental illness kept him from finishing the movie, he would



Gala keynote speaker Joe Pantoliano

The highlight of the evening was keynote speaker Joe Pantoliano, the eccentric mobster Ralph Cifaretto from the “The Sopranos,” a role that won him an Emmy for best-supporting actor.

“I was dazed, confused, addicted to painkillers and alcohol, and I found myself shoplifting,” Pantoliano said, describing his bout with what was later diagnosed as clinical depression. “I didn’t know what was going on and I was angry with myself. I began to blame others for my illness.”

He mentioned a time when he interviewed for a movie and was required to take a physical. Like most of us, he faced general health questions and was asked what medications he was taking. He gave them the list, including his anti-depressant.

The next day, he received a call telling him that he was a high risk for the industry because of his diagnosis of mental illness, and the only

be financially responsible for the movie.

Pantoliano was amazed that the industry was more worried about his mental state than his physical state, he said. “I could have had a stroke, a heart attack or dropped dead. I was taking medication for high cholesterol and other physical conditions and that would have been okay, but when it came to my mental illness, it became an issue.”

Today, Pantoliano is an advocate fighting against the stigma associated with mental illness. He recently started his own nonprofit organization, “No Kidding, Me Too!” When I asked about the name, he said there was no better way to end the stigma. With that, Pantoliano rushed off for another event. You can check out his Website nokiddingmetoo.org and see a preview of his NKM2 documentary on YouTube. ■



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