

200 stuffed animals are witnesses as court honors boy's good deed

A 12-year-old collects teddy bears for new adoptees. Evin Whitfield was visiting his mom at Orange County Juvenile Court for Bring Your Child to Work Day last year when he noticed a handful of teddy bears on a courtroom shelf.

“What are those for?” the 12-year-old asked.

His mom, Titania Whitfield, a court collections officer, explained that the court has a tradition of giving a stuffed animal to each child whose adoption is finalized.

“They need more stuffed animals,” Whitfield told his mom. “We should do something about that.”

So the Carson boy launched a teddy bear drive and enlisted help from his seventh-grade class at Rolling Hills Preparatory School in San Pedro. He set a goal of 100. In a few months, he had more than 200 stuffed animals.

On Wednesday, he was honored with a special Certificate of Appreciation from Orange County Superior Court for his toy-raising efforts. In a courtroom at the Lamoreaux Justice Center, Judge Clay M. Smith presented the award and shook hands with Whitfield while surrounded by a colorful sea of stuffed animals.

“At the age of 12, he has learned to make things happen,” the judge said.

Whitfield is an honor roll student who loves baseball and wants to become a patent attorney. He said he plans to do the toy drive every year.

“I wanted to give them something, because I didn’t know how it felt to have nothing of your own,” he said.

Every Wednesday, Judge Smith approves about six adoptions. Many of the children come from far-off places, such as Haiti, Africa, Russia and China.

“We were getting low on toys and this will keep us going for quite awhile,” Smith said. “It’s the nicest, most beautiful collection of stuffed animals we’ve had.”



A Big Bird was among the stuffed animals collected.



Evin Whitfield, 12, is honored Wednesday by Orange County Superior Court Judge Clay M. Smith, right, for collecting stuffed animals to be given to children whose adoptions are finalized in Family Law Court.

Lou Correa credited with rescuing 7 from Santa Ana fire

By SCOTT SCHWEBKE

SANTA ANA – Congressional candidate and former state Sen. Lou Correa is being credited with rescuing seven people Wednesday after a balcony at a Santa Ana apartment complex caught fire.

The incident happened about 10:30 a.m. in the 2000 block of North Broadway, Orange County Fire Authority Capt. Steve Concialdi said.

Correa, 58, said he was driving south on Broadway to a meeting when he noticed flames coming from an apartment building.

“Out of the corner of my eye I saw fire erupt on the second-story balcony,” he said Wednesday afternoon.

“I said to myself, ‘I can’t believe it’s happening.’ ”

Correa made a U-turn, parked his car, grabbed a garden hose, started applying water to the balcony, and yelled for the occupants in a unit in front of the fire to get out.

“My only thought was, I better win this fight because the flames were reaching to the roof overhang,” he said. “One hand was holding the hose and the other was dialing 911. I just wanted to lend a helping hand.”

Correa’s efforts enabled three woman and four children, all under 5, to escape their apartment safely, Concialdi said.

“The quick action kept the fire in check and from spreading into the apartment,” he added.

By the time firefighters arrived, the blaze was practically out. The cause of the fire that resulted in about \$2,000 in damage is under investigation.

Correa is a candidate in the June 7 primary to succeed Congresswoman Loretta Sanchez, who is running for the U.S. Senate.



Correa

Driver gets 6 years for mowing down couple

By SEAN EMERY

SANTA ANA – A driver who struck and killed a woman and injured her husband as the couple walked their dog on the Fourth of July was sentenced Wednesday to six years in prison.

Orange County Superior Court Judge Kazuharu Makino sentenced Christopher James Gallo, 46, of San Clemente, as part of a plea agreement that required Gallo to plead guilty to vehicular manslaughter, among other charges.

At the time of the 2013 crash, shortly after 9 a.m. on Golden Lantern near Beacon Hill Way in Laguna Niguel, Gallo was awaiting trial on drunken driving charges and had a suspended license. He drove his vehicle over a curb and onto the sidewalk.

Luzanna Malec was killed and her husband, Tom Malec, was seriously injured. Officers at the scene suspected that Gallo was under the influence, authorities said.

During Wednesday's emotional sentencing, half a dozen family members and friends recalled Luzanna Malec's impact on their lives.

An investment adviser and former physical exercise teacher and tennis coach, Luzanna Malec was remembered as outgoing, devoted to family and always willing to help those around her.

"For those who knew her, my mother was the kind of person you wanted to be around," Kathryn Malec said. "She had a gift with people and could win over anyone. ... She was a person who really listened to you and pushed you to achieve your goals."

Tom Malec described his wife of more than 30 years as having "the most positive attitude you will ever see." He recalled the family dinners they hosted weekly, which as the family grew required additions to their home to accommodate a longer table.

"Nothing I can say here will describe how much I miss her," he said.

More than 1,000 people attended his wife's funeral.

The family has remained tight-knit in the years since the tragedy, members said.

Civic Center overhaul is underway as \$7.7 million design contract OK'd

Supervisors pave way for renovation of Building 16, which has been unused for decades.

SANTA ANA – A 20-year plan to renovate the seat of Orange County government begins with the reconstruction of a single building – and county supervisors on Tuesday approved a \$7.7 million contract for the design of that structure.

The Civic Center's 60-plus-year-old Building 16 is decrepit, asbestos-laden and has sat unoccupied for nearly 30 years.

Supervisors have discussed what to do with the structure, located at 601N. Ross St. in Santa Ana, since at least 2007.

Tuesday's vote to award the design contract to Los Angeles-based Griffin Structures Inc. begins a process toward demolishing the building and erecting a \$150 million replacement.

That reconstruction is the first portion of a four-phase plan to replace the Civic Center's 40- to 50-year-old buildings and huddle affiliated services closer together in a "super block" of government facilities. The remaining phases have yet to be approved by the Board of Supervisors.

Building 16's design is set to be completed in summer 2017. At that time the board will decide whether to finance the project by issuing tax-free bonds or by having Griffin fund construction and lease the property to the county until the rent pays for the cost of the building.

County staff estimated that the cost for the building could grow to \$300 million when accounting for interest. The county projects the building will open in mid-2020.

Supervisor Todd Spitzer said Tuesday that the plan to rebuild Building 16 should include a strategy to help the dozens of the Civic Center's estimated 500 homeless people who live just outside the structure.

Supervisor Shawn Nelson agreed that some of the area's homeless would likely be displaced.

But he said the county had already tried to help by beginning the process of purchasing a site for a permanent homeless shelter in the city in 2014 before Santa Ana city officials backed away from the plan.

"Some people may need to relocate across the street," Nelson said. "We had a solution for that, and the city didn't want it."