

Tuesday, June 20, 2006

RFK's legacy: agency for youths expands in Lancaster

By Karen Nugent TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

LANCASTER— It was June 6, 1968, and Lt. John F. Kerry had just arrived in the U.S. from his Navy duty in the Vietnam War.

And just about the first thing he heard was the horrifying news from Los Angeles: Robert F. Kennedy was dead.

"We were listening to his speech at the Ambassador Hotel, and then, we heard the shots fired," Mr. Kerry, D-Mass., told a crowd gathered at one of Kennedy's legacies: The Robert F. Kennedy Children's Action Corps.

"One of Bobby Kennedy's principles was that everyone deserves a chance to grab onto that brass ring," the U.S. senator said.

Mr. Kerry led the opening yesterday afternoon of a new residence and family center on the grounds of the state-run facility for at-risk youth, off Old Common Road.

The nonprofit agency has 17 programs in 10 locales around the state.

The Lancaster campus consists of a school and residential program for boys, and a few girls, ages 6 to 17, most of whom have been placed there by the state Department of Social Services. There is also a day program.

The Boston-based agency was founded in 1969 as a memorial to Robert F. Kennedy, and the Lancaster campus opened in 1972 on part of the grounds of the 19th-century Industrial School for Girls, which closed the next year. The Action Corps shared the site with the minimum-security Lancaster State Prison pre-release center, until it closed in 2002.



The new building has been in the works for about 15 years. (T&G Staff/RICK CINCLAIR)

The new building, which has been in the works for about 15 years, according to CEO Edward P. Kelley, can hold up to 72 boys.

It is part of a \$14.5 million two-part project. The new building, on a former wooded area, has four color-coded wings in 37,000 square feet of a somewhat homey atmosphere.

But, according to campus administrator Bill Hogan, the best part yesterday was the new building's central air conditioning.

"Last Friday, we moved 52 kids, and all their belongings. And tonight will be their first night with central air conditioning," he said to a round of applause from the sweltering crowd under a tent on the lawn.

Mr. Kerry met privately with four boys from the facility before the official opening, and then led them in the Pledge of Allegiance in front of the audience.

"It's the celebration of the 'big crib.' I can feel the energy and enthusiasm here," Mr. Kerry said, noting that the boys told him the old building was hot in the summer, and has old clanging radiators that kept them awake in the winter.

The RFK Children's Action Corps, and its staff, he said, allow children to "live out the promise of this country."

"This is the most important work in the country — right here in Lancaster," Mr. Kerry said.

"Everything we do and think about, really, begins with children. A lot of folks in this country have trouble grasping that in real terms," he said.

"Too many children struggle without a family, without adequate input. Values do not just grow on a tree — values are taught to people."

Also on hand yesterday was Philip W. Johnston, one of the founders of the Action Corps., who, upon taking the podium, said, "John Kerry will be in the White House one day, and we'll be a better country for it."

Mr. Johnston commended the staff, especially for working long hours for little pay.