

# Deseret News

---

## Plaza flap led the way to real unity

**By Lee Benson**  
Deseret News

*Published: June 18, 2008*

The Sorenson Unity Center has been up and running now for three weeks— and to considerably less fanfare than the controversy out of which it emerged.

Not that anyone's complaining.

For the benefit of those who are new to Salt Lake City, or who have tried to forget what happened, here is a short historical review:

- In 1999, the LDS Church bought a block of Main Street in downtown Salt Lake City to build a walking plaza.
- Civil rights advocates protested the loss of civil liberties, principally freedom of speech.
- Lawyers were hired.
- After years of legal wrangling and often heated debate, Salt Lake Mayor Rocky Anderson played the role of Solomon by brokering a deal that got the LDS Church to donate two-plus acres it owned on the corner of 1300 South and 900 West in exchange for the city relinquishing public easement rights on Main Street.
- Spurred by the church's donation of land, philanthropist James L. Sorenson donated another four-plus acres of land and nearly \$1 million; the Alliance for Unity, a group made up of cultural, civic and religious leaders, donated another \$4.2 million; and Salt Lake City found an additional \$2 million in qualifying federal development funds.

That is the recipe that resulted in the new \$6.5 million, 26,000-square-foot community center located some three miles from the Main Street Plaza.

I walked through the new facility yesterday.

There's a fitness center, an aerobics/dance studio, conference rooms, a kitchen, a computer center, a theater and a place where the poor and homeless can get free dental care.

At midmorning, the biggest crowd was in the dentist's office. Stephanie Jensen, the executive director of Salt Lake Donated Dental Services, explained that to qualify as a patient, you need to have an annual income below the federal poverty level— and they never have a lack of customers.

"We see an average of 20 patients a day," she said, "and for every one we treat, we turn one away."

Donated Dental moved here from an older, more cramped and more expensive location, and it's already paying off.

"We should be able to increase our services by \$85,000 this year," said Jensen.

Across the way, the fitness center was only partially full, but as Angela Romero, the Unity

Center's program coordinator, explained, "By 5 o'clock it gets really crowded."

Angela works for Salt Lake City Corp. "But it's not just government that is here," she said. "It's a real partnership."

The city, county, Salt Lake Community College (which holds classes in the classrooms) and nonprofits like the free dental charity are all involved.

Already, in the three weeks since opening, Angela pointed out that they've held college classes, piano recitals, plays, weddings, community meetings and turned the lobby into an art gallery—all at minimal or no fee.

"People are amazed by what's provided here," she said.

Not to mention the unity that all that original turmoil has created.

*Lee Benson's column runs Sunday, Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Please send e-mail to [benson@desnews.com](mailto:benson@desnews.com) and faxes to 801-237-2527.*

© 2008 Deseret News Publishing Company | All rights reserved