



STEPHEN B. AIZENBERG: Shaping a community

Developer is proud of Centennial Academy, private school he founded

By BROCK RADKE
VIEW STAFF WRITER, 04/29/2008

As president of Royal Construction Co. and Spinnaker Homes, the builder of countless single-family residential projects and developer of the current Echelon at Centennial Hills, Stephen B. Aizenberg has left quite the imprint on the growth of Southern Nevada and northwest Las Vegas.

But the project he seems most proud of isn't a vast sea of homes in one of those residential subdivisions, nor is it an upscale, modern townhome building at Echelon. It's the one he built to give back to the community, a place he visits frequently to get what he calls his "Centennial Academy fix."

Aizenberg founded the 37,000-square-foot private school for kids in sixth grade and younger at 6610 Grand Montecito Parkway five years ago. When he's not overseeing a real estate project -- or checking on his interests around Nevada and California in his own helicopter, as flying is another passion -- Aizenberg might be found supervising lunchtime or a reading session in the library with the school's mascot, Harvey the rabbit.

"Being around these kids just warms my heart," he said. "I'm very grateful to be able to do something for the community, something that has been so well received. I have many business associates, local subcontractors and others who have sent their children here, and they just come back with the most glowing accolades. The teachers here are angelic, the entire staff is just marvelous. It's really a family here."



vic valbuena Bareng/viewStephen B. Aizenberg stands in the cafeteria of Centennial Academy, which offers toddler and preschool programs and classes for grades K-6.



Vic Valbuena bareng/viewReal estate developer Stephen B. Aizenberg holds a proclamation inside Centennial Academy, a private school at 6610 Grand Montecito Parkway, which he founded five years ago. Aizenberg is president of Royal Construction Co. and Spinnaker Homes and is developing Echelon at Centennial Hills.

Centennial Academy was designed with the community's interests in mind, he said. While it is a private school and it's not free, tuition rates are constantly reviewed in order to accommodate families of varying financial status. And the school is not tied to any religious affiliation in an effort to welcome all comers.

"Las Vegas is really a melting pot, and this school personifies that," Aizenberg said.

With over 20 classrooms equipped with closed-circuit TV, a computer lab, a large multipurpose room with a commercial kitchen and three separate age-appropriate playgrounds, Centennial Academy certainly is not the typical education experience for young children, Aizenberg said. The toddler program handles ages 15 months to 2 years, the preschool program hosts 3- and 4-year-olds, and the lower school program accommodates kids in grades K-6.

"I'm asked sometimes, 'why a school?' and the answer is, I wanted to give something back to the community that gave so much to me," Aizenberg said. "And it has been equally warm and fuzzy for the neighborhood. It was fate, and it was the right thing to do.

"But when I came to Las Vegas, I was crippled financially. There was no (market) in California. I had built here before, but I decided to uproot my entire company from Sacramento because I had been humbled by the economy there."

After graduating from the University of Pacific in Stockton, Calif., in 1966, Aizenberg worked for six years with Central Valley National Bank in Oakland, which eventually led to a position as vice president of construction for Greater Sierra Construction, a partnership with the bank. There he supervised the construction of apartment complexes and other projects through California, Nevada and Arizona.

Starting in the late 1970s, Aizenberg began developing his own Royal Construction Co., which expanded beyond apartments into single-family home development, still centralized in Northern California.

The economic doldrums of the first Gulf War in the early '90s is what sparked his company's shift to Southern Nevada, and early successes in the northwest part of Las Vegas helped maintain his interest in the area to this day.

"We've always been partial to the northwest, having had an extensive presence here for 10 years or so," said Aizenberg, a resident of Summerlin. "There was Spring Mountain Ranch, then we bought Appaloosa Canyon.

We've enjoyed being engaged with the Centennial area. When I first bought property in this area, many of my colleagues thought I was crazy and told me I couldn't build houses here. I wish I could buy land at those prices today."

While he has played a major role in the growth of the area, even Aizenberg has been surprised at the bustling development in Centennial Hills.

"The northwest has surprised me. This is going to be the center of Las Vegas, as a residential hub," he said. "When you look at what the Beltway has done, making it so easy to get around, and now having the hospital right around the corner from the school ... there are so many things going on."

Rochelle Wilson, Aizenberg's wife and business partner and general counsel for Centennial Academy, said the steady growth in the area has enhanced the quality of life for her neighbors and the families that call the school home.

"Any kind of asset that improves our lives, be it education or a neighborhood business, it benefits us all," Wilson said. "Our vision for the school has always been to provide the best education and still make it viable for many families, and fortunately we've seen growth at the school as the community around us thrives."

Aizenberg also has turned his hobby of flying into a business tool. He earned his student's license in 1969 when he was being sent by plane to check on his employer's various projects, spread out among several states. In an effort to save time, he started flying himself around, and in 1991 he started flying helicopters.

Now, he operates Desert Aviation Services Inc. out of the North Las Vegas Airport on West Cheyenne Avenue.

"It used to take quite a while to get out there and check on every project we had going on," he said. "Now, we can do it by helicopter in one day."