

'Grand Opening' of Rosie the Riveter Visitor Center Draws Crowd, Dignitaries, "Rosies"

A long-awaited crown of sorts was placed on the Rosie the Riveter WWII National Park in Richmond Saturday with the "grand opening" ceremony and ribbon-cutting for the park's Visitor Education Center.

- By [Charles Burress](#)
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It sits three miles due west from the El Cerrito border – the former home of one of the biggest manufacturing centers of military might in American history.

The Kaiser shipyards and Ford assembly plant on the Richmond shoreline not only produced ships, jeeps and tank equipment that helped the United States and its allies win World War II, but they also created an enormous growth in the local population as well as economic and social changes that are still being felt today.

And one of the most memorable impacts of the "home front" war industry was symbolized by the iconic "Rosie the Riveter" – with her rolled-up sleeves, flexed bicep and can-do expression. She represented the recruitment of women not just into riveting ships together but also into a wide range of jobs that had been done mostly by men, many of whom had gone off to war.

The dream of commemorating those women and the changes wrought by the home front in the war took shape in the minds of a handful of civic leaders in Richmond in the late 1990s. Against improbable odds and with the help of many others, they succeeded in establishing in 2000 the Rosie the Riveter Memorial and the [Rosie the Riveter/World War II Home Front National Historical Park](#).

The park, however, lacked a visitor and information center – until Saturday, when a panoply of elected officials and others instrumental in creating the park held a ["grand opening" ceremony and ribbon-cutting](#) for the long-planned Visitor Education Center.

About 300 people, including about a dozen former "Rosies" in seats of honor in the first and second rows, attended the ceremony and toured the exhibits in the new center, housed in the refurbished oil-storage building for the old Ford assembly plant.

"This site is one of the most dynamic in the Bay Area," Congressman George Miller said during the speeches before the ribbon was cut. Miller, whose district includes Richmond, carried the legislation that created the park.

"This is a great day that I think we're not going to forget," said Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia, whose district includes Richmond. Gioia noted that he and his wife, Jennifer Peck, were among the approximately 1,000 people attending the "Rosie's Big Bash," a dinner and dance the night before at Ford Craneway Pavilion that was part of the weekend festivities celebrating the visitor center opening.

Gioia and other speakers paid tribute to the Richmond civic leaders who initiated the efforts that led to the park.

"Just like this park tells the story of individual people during the war and what those stories meant about us as a city and a country," Gioia said, "this wonderful national park would not have happened without some great individual stories of people over the last 18 or so years who had an idea and were committed to making it happen."

Among those, Gioia said, were former Richmond City Councilwoman Donna Powers, arts and cultural planner Donna Graves, former shipyard worker Ludie Mitchell (whose moving testimony before Congress helped win passage of the park legislation), Congressman Miller (whose father worked in the shipyards as a labor organizer), Richmond City Councilman Tom Butt, and Betty Soskin (who did shipyard-related work during the war and is now at age 90 a ranger at the park, the oldest ranger in the park system.)

Soskin, who's African-American and witnessed the large African-American influx to the Bay Area during the war, expressed concerns a number of years ago that the park include the negative as well as the positive stories of the home front, Gioia said.

"It was voices like Betty that made sure this park tells the whole story," he said. Among the exhibits in the visitor center, for example, is one devoted to the removal of people of Japanese ancestry from the West Coast into relocation camps during the war.

Gioia also praised the hard work of the park's first superintendent, Judy Hart, who at one early point, lacking even a park office, used a desk and a copy machine in Gioia's county supervisor's office.

Also on stage as a speaker was Graves, who painted the historical and social context, saying the visitors center will serve as "point of entry, a portal" to the many components of the park and the "astonishing transformations" that occurred in the city and the nation during World War II.

Graves drew audience laughter when she referred to the Rosie the Riveter/World War II Home Front National Historical Park as "the longest name of any park in the system."

Butt spoke wearing an aluminum helmet similar to what the shipyard workers wore during the war. He has played a leading role in the park's realization, in part as chair of the Rosie the Riveter Trust, a non-profit that has raised \$11 million for projects for the park.

Park Superintendent Tom Leatherman, acting as master of ceremonies, paid tribute to the trust, saying, "Without the Rosie the Riveter Trust, which for the last 10 years has been headed by Tom Butt, we probably wouldn't be standing here today."

Leatherman referred also to Powers, who sat in the audience, as a "driving force behind the memorial." And Miller recalled the moment Powers first approached him about what seemed then an Quixotic quest: "When Donna suggested we might do something like this, I just rolled my eyes. But she said, no, it was a matter of doing this, or watching this site get destroyed and get gobbled up."

Credit was given also to Eddie Orton, whose development company owns the Ford assembly plant and the building housing the visitor center. His company did the retrofitting and interior refurbishing that made the visitor center possible.

"Thousands of people have contributed to this opening," Orton said. "Hundreds of people have worked on this project."

State Senator Loni Hancock displayed a resolution from her and Assemblywoman Nancy Skinner in honor of the occasion, those who made it happen and the "Rosies."

Among the former "Rosies" in attendance was an El Cerrito resident whose actual name is Rosie – Rosie Cembura, 85.

"But I wasn't a riveter," she told Patch. "I was a painter in Yard 3, painting ships." Just out of high school, she was first assigned to difficult scrub work in the ship's hold, but she showed skill and ability and was later assigned to more desirable finish work, she said.

She recalled earning about \$1.20 an hour. "That was big money in those days."

Accompanying her inside the visitor center was Ernestine Wean of El Cerrito, who at age 16 took over picking crops and performing other agricultural work during the war that had been done by men.

"There were no young men to pick the crops," she said. She recalled cash awards at special high school assemblies at the end of the season for girl students who had done exceptionally well in the fields.

The Visitor Education Center is now open everyday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., except Christmas and New Year's Day. It is located at 1414 Harbour Way South in Richmond.

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