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Reagan's birthday celebrated ; More than 300 show up to Ronald Reagan Ranch Center for festivities

BILL McMORRIS, NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

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Well over 300 people turned out at the Ronald Reagan Ranch Center, located at 217 State St., to celebrate the late president's 98th birthday on Friday.

Those in attendance were treated to exclusive tours of the center, which has undergone extensive renovations and improvements over the past several years.

One of the new additions to the center was an extensive second-floor gallery, which featured automated displays that allow guests to listen to and watch some of President Reagan's most famous speeches, debates and addresses.



Several birthday cakes honoring former President Ronald Reagan were served during an open house to celebrate the 40th U.S. President's birthday at an open house at the Young America's Foundation's Ronald Reagan Ranch Center on State Street.

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The gallery impressed UCSB junior and ROTC candidate Hunter Jackson. "It's amazing how well they did at preserving all of this history," he said, as he admired Mr. Reagan's sky blue Jeep.

That vehicle was the only part of the gallery in place when Ryan McNicholas, executive director of the UCSB College Republicans, first came to the center.

"It is amazing to see how the center keeps expanding. It serves as a reminder of the most influential president of the 20th century," said the 22-year-old junior.

Even knowledgeable Reagan fans walked out of the celebration a little more enlightened.

"I consider myself a huge fan of Reagan, but there are a lot of speeches and facts here that I was unaware of," said Santa Barbara County Republican Executive Director Corey Bantilan, as he took an audio-visual tour of the center.

There were several people in attendance that knew the late president personally, including former Secret Service agent and Reagan confidante John Barletta, who was on hand to sign copies of his book, "Riding with Reagan" but not many could have known Mr. Reagan as long as Marge Nordyke.

Ms. Nordyke's relationship with President Reagan stretches back far beyond his years in the California and national spotlights to his first career, as a sports broadcaster in the Midwest. The 90-year-old resident, then a student at the University of Iowa, knew that there was something special about Mr. Reagan. It was the beginning of a relationship that would span six decades.



Above left, Andrew Coffin, left, director of the Ronald Reagan Ranch Center, chats with Doug and Karen Crawford of Santa Barbara, during a celebration of President Reagan's birthday. Above right, Marge Nordyke proudly displays a photo of herself with President Reagan. Behind her are other photos showing her years-long interaction with the Reagans in Santa Barbara during the 1980s. She even helped the president acquire bags of jelly beans from candy maker Jelly Belly, maker of one of President Reagan's fondest treats.

STEVE MALONE/NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS



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Ms. Nordyke would eventually come to serve as an aide to the "Gipper," as friends called him. In fact, she was entrusted with one of the biggest responsibilities in the White House -- maintaining a stable level of Jelly Belly jelly beans to sustain the president and guests of the White House.

No Reagan meeting, be it between a head-of-state or personal guest, could begin without the president first presenting a full bowl of the candy, according to Ms. Nordyke.

"This center really captures the personal and friendly nature of Reagan," she said, as she gestured towards a bag of jelly beans on the table.

"It is great to be here and see all these people, especially when I get to see old friends like John Barletta," Ms. Nordyke said, as she layered her table with personal photos of herself and the president. "And I cannot believe the amount of young people and children that are here today."

Identical twins Tyler and Ryan McLean, 3, were among the dozens of children on hand to celebrate the late president's life. Guests, especially the McLean children, enjoyed the slew of birthday cakes bearing the president's image and light refreshments offered at the reception.

Ryan and Tyler's family, however, took them along for the two-hour drive from Manhattan Beach for very different reasons.

"We wanted them to start learning history -- not to mention conservative ideas -- young," said the twins' grandmother Elaine Wilmot.

That is one of the very reasons why the center opens its doors every Feb. 6, according to Executive Director Andrew Coffin. "It allows us to share with the community the ideals that Reagan defined; those ideas that the center wants to pass on to future generations," he said.

Her husband Dave, like Ms. Nordyke, has always had an affinity for Mr. Reagan, dating back to his own encounter with the late president. Mr. Wilmot was 19 when he served as an extra in the Ronald Reagan comedy "Bedtime for Bonzo."

"I followed Reagan all the way from heading the Screen Actor's Guild to becoming the governor of California to his days in the White House," said Mr.

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Wilmot admiringly.

"He was one of my heros, and I want to share that with my grandchildren."

Young America's Foundation, a nonprofit organization aimed at promoting conservatism on college campuses, has hosted the celebration for the past several years.

"Now is a natural time for us to open up our doors and honor Ronald Reagan," said Mr. Coffin. "We get to share a part of local history with the Santa Barbara community."

The center is seeing an increasing segment of the community turning out for the celebration.

George Thompson, who serves as the caretaker at Reagan's home in Santa Barbara County, Rancho del Cielo, has seen turnout increase dramatically since he first came to the celebration four years ago.

"We only had about 100, maybe 150 that first year, now we're seeing nearly 400," Mr. Thompson said.

The increase in local interest is a testament to Reagan, as much as it is the center, according to Mr. Coffin.

"This just demonstrates how much goodwill and appreciation people have for Ronald Reagan and what he did for this country," he said.

e-mail: bmcmorris@newspress.com

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