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## New Wealth, and Worries, for the Salvation Army

By [STEPHANIE STROM](#)

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SAN DIEGO — A [Salvation Army](#) center is an unlikely home for a \$2.5 million Henry Moore sculpture, but here it stood, all but buried under summer campers using it as a jungle gym.

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The sculpture and the center, an \$87 million complex featuring three swimming pools, indoor ice skating and skateboarding, playing fields and a 600-seat theater, were gifts from Joan Kroc, wife of the McDonald's Corporation founder, Ray Kroc.

Mrs. Kroc, who died in 2003, also left the Salvation Army \$1.5 billion to build 30 to 40 more Kroc centers now planned around the country, providing low-income neighborhoods the kind of facilities that even well-to-do communities can rarely afford.

But this new wealth and the glittering centers it is buying have posed a challenge for the Salvation Army and caused soul-searching about its core purpose.

The organization was wary of the gift from the time Mrs. Kroc first proposed it, and many of its officers continue to fear that the centers will confuse donors about its mission, leaving the impression that it is a flush charity that operates sleek recreation complexes rather than a frugal church that devotes itself to serving the needy.

"There's a fear of this gift," said Barbara Hunsaker, a member of the advisory board for the center here and a longtime volunteer at the Door of Hope, a transitional housing facility for homeless women and their children that the Salvation Army operates in downtown San Diego. "I've heard officers worry that it's taking the army away from its mission. But this is their mission."

Still, Cmdr. Israel L. Gaither, who assumed leadership of the national organization in May, worries that the Kroc centers will change not only public perception of the army but also the army's perception of itself.

"We are at a crossroads, and the challenge for us is to remain true to our mission," Commander Gaither said. "The whole idea is to build on what has been accomplished, not to build something completely different."

Running the centers will require the army to adopt a more commercial mind-set

than its customary charitable work entails. Mrs. Kroc's \$1.5 billion gift is believed to be history's largest to a charity (though big foundations, another beneficiary of the wealthy, have often received more). But because it includes only enough endowment money to cover half the centers' annual operating costs, the organization figures it will have to raise as much as \$70 million a year for that purpose, some of it in fees from users of the facilities.

So when Salem, Ore., set about applying to be the home of one center, it did extensive research on what kinds of features would make money.

"Competitive pools offered a low return on investment; family aquatics centers offered high returns," said John Seby, executive director of development and public relations for the army's Cascade Division, headquartered in nearby Portland. "Day care didn't pay well, ice rinks did."

Salem prevailed with a proposal that included a water park. It decided against an ice rink, which is the San Diego center's biggest moneymaker, because the area already had several, and scaled back its library plans when it was awarded \$25 million, \$5 million less than it had asked for.

Many forget that the Salvation Army is a church, knowing it instead for the bells its volunteers ring to raise money during the holidays or for its thrift shops.

But the army's real "business," effectively putting into practice what it preaches, is operating a network of housing for the elderly, transitional housing for struggling families, summer camps and what are called "corps centers," where services range from after-school programs to drug rehabilitation.

The organization also does disaster relief work. After Hurricane Katrina, victims, public officials and emergency workers spoke glowingly of the help the army had given them, often contrasting it with services from the [American Red Cross](#).

Army officials cringe at the competition that such comparisons might suggest, but welcome the donations the attention is attracting. The army raised more than \$360 million for hurricane victims, a fraction of the billions raised by the Red Cross but more than four times what it has raised for any other disaster and more than three times what its biggest annual fund-raising effort, the Christmas kettle drive, brought in last year.

Yet it is the new community centers — now planned for Atlanta, Phoenix, Honolulu and San Francisco, among other places — that are drawing the most notice.

"The army's always been there, quietly behind the scenes taking care of what needs to be taken care of without much fanfare or attention," said Janet Taylor, the mayor of Salem, which will break ground on its center in October. "This is going to raise their profile tremendously."

The center in San Diego, formally the Ray and Joan Kroc Corps Community Center, opened in 2002, before Mrs. Kroc's death, as a pilot project. It quickly took root in the community.

A good example is the water aerobics class that Ms. Hunsaker takes in the Olympic-

size pool on weekday mornings. When the class began, the participants were strangers. Now they share their homes for monthly potluck dinners, go on family trips together and raise money for the army's programs. The group spans socioeconomic classes, drawing from wealthier parts of the city and surrounding areas as well as the lower-middle-class neighborhood that surrounds the center.

"Together we have survived breast cancer, hip replacements, divorces, marriages, new babies, dogs dying and car crashes," said Mickee Norberg, a class member.

Two years ago the group published a cookbook that raised \$3,000 for scholarships the army awards. It has sold aprons to raise money for the center, and members have donated food, toys and time to the army's traditional holiday causes.

The site Mrs. Kroc selected for her center was down on its luck. Homeless people had moved in after a Ralph's supermarket closed and a Home Depot made plans to move to nearby Lemon Grove. Many storefronts along University Avenue on either side of the center's site were empty, and the rest housed tattoo parlors, strip joints, body shops and welfare offices.

"All around here was a two-to-three-mile radius where kids didn't have any activities, nothing to do but wander around on the streets," said Art Madrid, the mayor of adjacent La Mesa.

Now there are two Starbucks stores and a Sears Essential near the center, and teenagers can come float in the pools, join hockey and figure-skating programs or nurture dreams of becoming the next Shaun White while doing flips on their skateboards.

Membership and program fees are modest — an eight-week package of skating lessons, including use of the rink and skates, costs \$88 — and no participants pay more than they can afford. Roughly 70 percent of the 2,500 people who use the center each day pay something.

"I think it's great," said Solene Goycochea, 15, strapping on her skates. "The ice is much faster than the place where I used to skate, and I like the people here better."

Phyllis Taylor's 11-year-old granddaughter, Madi, all but lives at the rink. "I was just going to do figure skating, but my friend pushed me to do hockey too, and I love it," Madi said. At school she was the only student in her class being raised by her grandmother, but at the center she has made friends with three other girls just like her.

Ms. Taylor is also a convert. "When I first heard about this place," she said, "the only thing I could think of was they were taking my Home Depot away. I had no idea I'd be spending half my life here."

The center offers the Salvation Army's traditional services like parenting classes, collecting and distributing food to the needy, and making referrals to social service programs.

It has also furthered the army's disaster relief efforts. During wildfires here in 2003, the basketball courts became a shelter for 500 people, while the kitchen

prepared meals for emergency workers. “The Kroc centers can be used in times of crisis for a variety of reasons,” said John Berglund, the army’s national disaster services coordinator.

But it is the recreation programs that have won over the neighborhood.

“I don’t know anything about the Salvation Army,” said Candy Henson, a water aerobics classmate of Ms. Hunsaker. “I just know what they’re doing for this community, and it’s good.”

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