

After-school center adds bullet-resistant materials

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SOUTH LOS ANGELES — Students studying at an after-school tutoring center will be a lot safer from injury or death from a stray bullet thanks to a \$23,000 donation that will go toward the installation of bullet-resistant materials on the exterior of the building.

The Al Wooten Jr. Youth Center occupies six buildings on Western Avenue in an area that has seen a surge in gunfire between rival gangs. The center has been hit by stray bullets at least five times since 2018.

The donation will cover the cost of removing the windows located on the building's front and replacing them with walls insulated with bullet-resistant Kevlar.

The center's wooden doors will be replaced by iron doors.

"Our student's safety is our number one priority," said Wooten Center Executive Director Naomi McSwain. "When we came back after being closed during the pandemic and found bullet holes in the building, we knew our reopening upgrades had to include safety from COVID and bullets."

With a donation from radio station KROQ FM and \$8,000 of their own funds, the Wooten Center installed bullet-resistant windows on three of the buildings. The center also reinforced the entry door with Kevlar insulation. When the money ran out of money, McSwain and her team used a metal file cabinet (per a



Al Wooten Jr. Youth Center Executive Director Naomi McSwain explains the required retrofits needed to reinforce the center from stray bullets. The after-school learning center has been hit by stray bullets at least five times since 2018. It recently received a \$23,000 donation to cover the costs of installing bullet-resistant materials to the building's exterior.

Photo by Cynthia Gibson

YouTube video) and three sheets of plexiglass removed from one of the buildings to fortify their computer lab.

McSwain was hopeful that Los Angeles County would be able to provide funding for after-school safety, but the county

had its own funding shortfall. She expressed her frustration during a Zoom call with members of the Community Response System of South Los Angeles, a safety net organization founded at the start of the pandemic.

Robert Sausedo, president of

the nonprofit Community Build and co-founder of the Community Response System, asked McSwain to send him a proposal with her request.

"This was unacceptable," Sausedo said. "Students, educators and volunteers in a learning

center shouldn't have to live in fear of being killed by a stray bullet."

He forwarded McSwain's proposal to one of his donors and asked for help on behalf of the Wooten Center. After touring the facility, the donor organization,

along with the board member, wrote checks to cover the cost of the retrofit. Installation of the Kevlar reinforcements is scheduled to be in February.

Ironically, the Wooten Center was created in response to the perils of gang violence. In January 1989, Alton "Dunnie" Wooten Jr., 35, was killed in a drive-by shooting near Adams and Crenshaw boulevards. The murder was said to be the result of a gang initiation. His mother, Myrtle Faye Rumph, channeled her grief into action and in 1990 she opened the Al Wooten Jr. Youth Center.

"What they need is love and attention," Rumph said about South Los Angeles youth. "They need to stay busy. They need to have more confidence. They need to have their attitudes changed. If somebody had taken more time with the person who killed my son, maybe my son would still be alive."

Rumph retired in 2009 at age 79. In 2010, President Barack Obama named her one of 13 recipients of the Presidential Citizens Medal, the nation's second-highest civilian award, for her work founding the Wooten Center. Rumph died in 2015.

The Wooten Center provides free after-school and low-cost summer programs to help students in grades 3-12 attain grade-level proficiency and promotion, high school graduation and college entry and career guidance. The Wooten Center serves more than 400 students per year at its location on Western Avenue and satellite locations.