

## A Short History of Vista Del Mar Child and Family Services

**A**t the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, millions of Jewish families fled Eastern Europe to escape persecution. Many of them came to the United States and packed into eastern cities already crowded and teeming with disease. In an effort to alleviate the crowded and unhealthy conditions, people were encouraged to move out west, where the population was sparse and where the warm, dry air was thought to be a cure for communicable illnesses like tuberculosis and polio. Unfortunately, many sufferers died of their illnesses anyway, leaving behind homeless and destitute families to fend for themselves.

### A Jewish Orphanage

In Los Angeles, the plight of the Jewish homeless greatly worried the members of B'nai B'rith Lodge Number 487. Guided by lodge member Sigfried Marshutz, an optometrist by trade, the lodge decided to establish a Jewish orphanage to care for the growing population of Jewish children living in the streets. On October 3, 1908, the Jewish Orphans Home of Southern California was incorporated.



The Alfred Stern mansion located on the corner of Mission and Macy (now Cesar Chavez) Streets in Boyle Heights served as the first home. Stern was a wine merchant who had passed away some years earlier, and the house was standing empty. Marshutz was able to secure a lease for only \$50 a month.

But a year and a half later, the mansion burned to the ground in the middle of the night. Although no one was injured, another home had to be quickly found. Fortunately, a large boarding house on 4<sup>th</sup> Street in Boyle Heights, across the street from Hollenbeck Park was soon located. There the

children remained for two years while the orphanage staff looked for a location to build a permanent home.

### Changing Trends in Child Welfare

**M**eanwhile, in 1909, at the first White House Conference on the Care of Dependent Children in Washington, D.C., President Theodore Roosevelt and the other members of the conference emphasized the importance of family and home life, and incorporated this ideology into a set of proposals that included the establishment of a Foster Care Program and the formation of the Federal Children's Bureau. The Conference urged



that institutional care of children be employed only as a last resort:

*“Home life is the highest and finest production of civilization. It is the great molding force of mind and Children should not be deprived of it except for urgent and compelling reasons. Except in unusual circumstances, the home should not be broken up for reasons of poverty, but only for considerations of inefficiency or immorality. ... So far as it may be found necessary temporarily or permanently to care for certain classes of children in institutions, these institutions should be conducted on the cottage plan.”*

The “cottage plan” was a new type of orphanage devised by reformers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to correct the stultifying effects of what they called “institutionalism,” or the crowding of many children into a single, massive edifice. Now the leaders of the Jewish Orphans Home of Southern California, having decided to build a cottage-style orphanage of their own, sought a plot of land that would accommodate such an undertaking.



They found it in Huntington Park, southeast of downtown Los Angeles, on the corner of Gage and Irvington (now Miles) Streets. Here, the leadership acquired ten acres and built the first modern, cottage-style orphanage in Southern California, which opened in November of 1912. The new orphanage included an administration building, which housed the infirmary and other offices, surrounded by several small “cottages” where the children lived. Siblings were kept together whenever possible, and the children did their own cooking and cleaning under the supervision of a house mother. Fresh milk was available from the orphanage’s own cows, and eggs from its flock of chickens. Children attended local schools.

## A New Home and a New Name

**B**ut by 1922, the foster care system in Los Angeles had taken root, and the orphanage found the numbers of children it served dwindling as they were “placed out” in neighborhood foster homes. The leadership decided to sell the orphanage and move to a former boy’s military academy in West Adams, with the ultimate goal of placing out all of the remaining children and closing the home.

This plan was never realized. There were simply too many children who needed homes, and the foster care system could not accommodate them all. Using the funds from the sale of the facility in Huntington Park, the leadership bought a tract of land in West Los Angeles that had been previously owned by real estate developer Thomas Hughes. Named Vista Del Mar, the property comprised 22 acres of rolling hills, a ranch house and barn. It was the perfect place for a new orphanage.



It was also the perfect time for a new superintendent, and the Board found just the right man in Joseph Bonapart. Bonapart had Masters degrees in both Psychology and Sociology and had taught in the New York City public school system. He had twice held the post of assistant at the Hebrew Orphan Asylum in New York City, prior to serving as superintendent at Homewood Terrace in San Francisco. Bonapart supervised the construction of the new orphanage.



The new location opened in 1925, with five two-story cottages plus the superintendent's home, an infirmary, a laundry, and several smaller residences for staff. Bonapart also suggested that the name of the orphanage be changed to Vista Del Mar, and the Board agreed. In 1929 a "preventorium" was added for children who had been exposed to communicable diseases. The Health Cottage, as it was called, was away from the other cottages and had its own school.

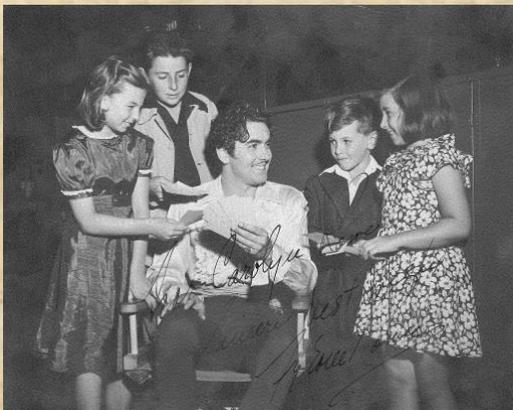
Located on Motor Avenue between Culver City and Century City, Vista Del Mar benefitted from its strategic location between two major movie studios: MGM and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox. The home was the frequent recipient of donations from the studios,

including movies for the kids to watch, gifts for Hanukkah, and costumes for the children's plays and dance recitals. In addition, notables from the film industry like Louis B. Mayer and George Cukor served on the Board. It was community support such as this that enabled Vista to weather the Great Depression.

In the mid-30s Vista started seeing an influx of Jewish children who had fled Nazi Germany and other countries where they were once again being persecuted. The trickle became a flood during the late 30s and early 40s, and continued even after the war as children who had lost their families made their way to the U.S. Vista cared for these



children both at the home and in the many foster homes that the agency supervised.



Many children who had grown to adulthood at Vista distinguished themselves during World War II, and sent back letters to Bonapart describing their exploits. Some even returned to campus to talk with the children, and served as positive role models for them. Children living at Vista during the war did their part, knitting sweaters for the troops, recycling rubber and other materials needed for the war effort, and selling war bonds.

## An Expanding Mission

**A**fter the war, Bonapart began noticing a change in the population being admitted to Vista Del Mar. More of them suffered severe behavioral and emotional disturbances than children in recent years. *“An increasing number are coming with scars in the form of serious behavior and emotional problems resulting from broken homes and parental irresponsibility,”* he stated in an almost prescient report to the board:

*“Children of hasty marriages and of unsolemnized wartime romances, those who have been hauled across the country from one trailer camp to another without ever knowing the security of a real home... these are just a few of those who will be appearing on the door steps of the agencies bringing with them very serious problems. Proper corrective services for these deprived and emotionally disturbed children cost more, both in money and intelligence, than does mere maintenance or custodial care.”*

Over time this trend would become the new normal, and would change not only the face of Vista, but its reason for existence.

Finally, in 1952, in response to the new services the agency was offering, Vista Del Mar changed its Articles of Incorporation to reflect its new mission:



*“The specific and primary purpose for which this Corporation is formed is: To operate an agency offering social, psychiatric and other services to children who are in need of these services, whether in their own homes, in foster homes, or in institutions for children...”*

The name of the agency was also changed from simply Vista Del Mar to Vista Del Mar Child Care Service.

In keeping with its new mission, Vista quickly constructed a new “treatment cottage” on the north end of campus. This cottage housed the most disturbed children and had its own school, since most

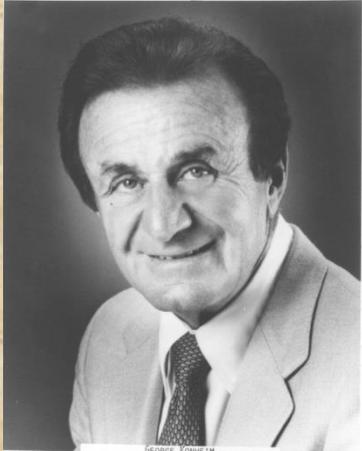
of these children were not able to attend public school. Staff for the new cottage included a social worker, a psychiatrist, and a full time teacher.

In 1955, the face of Vista changed again, as the Highway Commission announced the route of the new “Olympic Freeway,” which carved four acres off of the south end of the campus. Despite protests the freeway finally went through in 1962, requiring the demolition of Vista’s original synagogue and other structures. A new synagogue was built by 1965, with services being held in the gym until it was completed.



## A New Look

Other changes continued. Since Vista's inception, residents had always attended local schools, except those in the health and treatment cottages. But as the challenges facing the children became increasingly complex, they required special attention that most public schools were ill-equipped to provide. So, in 1972, a school was built in the space that had once held the Health Cottage. Children who were unable to attend public schools could now receive individualized instruction on campus. The school was under the supervision of the LAUSD and was staffed by specially trained LAUSD teachers. It remained that way until the 1980s, when Vista took over administration.



But perhaps the most noticeable change was the demolition of the old cottages and construction of the new. By the 1970s, the two-story cottages at Vista were 50 years old. Countless children had passed through their halls, with the associated wear and tear. Most importantly, they were no longer appropriate to the population that Vista was now serving. Fortunately, Vista's new chairman,

George Konheim, was a builder

and had the expertise to design new, innovative "cluster cottages" that allowed greater staffing efficiency. The first new cottage, funded by Ruth and Elliot Handler, was built on the open field on the north side of campus. Shortly after that, the Taper, Parvin, and Moss-Price-Shore Cottages were constructed on the site of the old two-story cottages, and the campus transformation was complete.



## The Mergers

The late 70s and early 80s were marked by a further expansion of Vista's mission to help children with special needs, including those with developmental delays. The most obvious sign of this expansion was Vista's mergers with other agencies, including the Reiss Davis Child Study Center, Home-SAFE, and the Julia Ann Singer Center.

The 1976 merger with Reiss Davis brought the expertise of a cadre of child psychology experts devoted to the intensive study and treatment of mental illness in children. With its psychodynamic approach to treatment, advanced assessment capabilities and a renown graduate study program, Reiss-Davis was already, and would continue to be known world-wide as the gold standard in children's mental health care.





Home-SAFE, (Services Aiding Family Equilibrium) was established in 1973 by the Los Angeles Chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) as a service model with family child care, counseling, parent education, mental health services, and family support services. The agency was affiliated with Thaliens at Cedars-Sinai before merging with Vista in 1979. Home-SAFE is located in Hollywood.



The Julia Ann Singer Center was founded in Boyle Heights in 1916 as a nursery school for working Jewish Mothers, but evolved into an agency that specialized in the care of children with developmental disabilities. Also a part of Thaliens, Julia Ann Singer joined the growing Vista family in 1982.

The final merger, with Family Service of Santa Monica, took place in 2000. Established in 1925, Family Service of Santa Monica added to Vista's ability to provide low cost mental health services to the Santa Monica area, including services to local schools and preschools. With the addition of these agencies, Vista was well on its way to becoming a one-stop destination for children with mental, behavioral, emotional or developmental challenges.



## New Treatment Models

**A**s time progressed, the severity of mental illness in the children who arrived at Vista became increasingly worse. Oftentimes a residential program was not suitable for these youngsters, but a psychiatric hospital was more than they required. Sensing an unfulfilled need, the Board and staff at Vista decided to build a Special Care Facility to provide a level of care beyond that afforded by the regular residential units, but less intensive than a psychiatric hospital.



In 1998, the Special Care Facility opened, one of only two such units in Southern California. The secure facility includes 24/7 care for residents, and an exclusive school where residents can be monitored at all times.

Meanwhile, the need for less restrictive care was also expanding. For many years, the trend in child welfare was moving toward family preservation, and Vista Del Mar, in partnership with Hathaway-Sycamores, became the first agency in Los Angeles to offer Wraparound services. The

goal of the program is to stabilize the family situation so that children will be able to remain in the home, rather than being placed in a foster care or residential care facility. Additional programs included

a wide array of Autism services, and an expanded non-public school that included a robust arts program and technologically up-to-date classrooms.

## A Century of Care

**A**s Vista begins its second century of service, the agency bears almost no physical resemblance to the orphanage it once was. Yet, it's deeply held commitment to serving the community remains unchanged. Children are still in need, although those needs have evolved greatly. In place of tuberculosis and polio, children now suffer from abuse, neglect, and despair. They experience emotional, behavioral and developmental difficulties that are just as daunting as those challenges faced by children of previous generations. And, like the founders before them, the current leadership at Vista



Del Mar views the needs of children of the city with compassion and a desire to serve, by providing the highest quality treatment programs available. In this sense, Vista Del Mar has not changed at all.

For more information about Vista Del Mar or to arrange for a tour, please contact Craig Horning at (310) 836-1223, extension 545, or at [craighorning@vistadelmar.org](mailto:craighorning@vistadelmar.org).