

Dramatic results for Harbor theater

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SANTA CRUZ — What started out three years ago as a booster project for Harbor High's parent club has ended up as a massive \$75,000 renovation of the school's Little Theater.

With hard-won money and a lot of elbow grease, the theater gradually has been transformed from a tattered classroom to a venue of professional class. And all it took was one determined parent, an understanding principal and a feisty group of blossoming young actors.

Karen Huffman, the parent who headed the project, said she took on the full-time job because "I didn't want to let the kids down."

Harbor's Parent Club had been a struggling group, she said — about 10 parents in an 11,000-student school — and needed a target project to "get the ball rolling" and get more people involved.

The 150 students in the theater arts department had long pleaded for help with their worn classroom. The 300-seat theater, built with the school in 1968, had never

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Parent Karen Huffman and Ken Thomas, Harbor High School principal, are pleased with renovations.

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been renovated and 24 years' worth of students had taken their toll.

The seats were torn and collapsing, the orange carpet threadbare, the curtain and walls dingy and patched.

"It looked like a greasy spoon in this place," said principal Ken Thomas.

At first, Huffman said, she was "dubious" that parents would get behind the costly project.

Over the summer, committees were formed and a fund-raising plan drawn up. The priorities were to paint, carpet and install new seats, which would cost an estimated \$35,000. The drive was to begin in October, 1989.

Then the Loma Prieta earthquake hit. "After that, we didn't want to approach businesses in Santa Cruz," said drama teacher Cathy Warner. "Everyone was devastated, so it kind of sat on a back burner."

The project was resurrected in March 1990, and the parents held a phone drive hoping to raise a modest \$5,000 in seed money. They got \$10,000.

"It was all a show of parents and students," Huffman said.

"People cared enough to donate at a real difficult time," said Thomas. "And the kids had no problem catching onto this."

The drama students held car washes to raise money for a richly colored plum curtain and backstage improvements. They scraped the seats clean of gum and graffiti. Student groups Interact and the Associated Student Body pitched in time and Grad Night money.

But as the project progressed, Huffman said, more work needed to be done and the price tag "kept rolling up."

Principal Thomas made the pitch for matching funds from the district and donations became vital.

Marian Vantress, owner of a local design firm, helped coordinate the theater's colors for free. Benjamin Moore Paint Co. donated paint. Schools Plus agreed to do the accounting. The construction tech class teamed up with the Regional Occupational Program to prep the walls.

Huffman turned to writing grants and got \$10,000 from the Greater Santa Cruz County Com-

munity Foundation, which, she said, "really put us over into the finish position."

Parents ran a second phone drive. Benefit performances were held. Student washed more cars and sold candy.

The end result is a theater with clean walls and fresh wallpaper, new lights and carpeting, and rows of gleaming seats. A gala performance for donors will christen the theater Thursday night.

Warner said her students are very proud and protective of what they've done over the years.

"Every time something new would happen, it would just feel better," she said. "There are kids there now who never saw (the theater) any other way, but the older kids remind them, 'you take care of this.'"

And in the midst of the renovation, the department still put on two productions a year. "The theater is about the reality that you can perform anywhere," said Warner. "We've dealt with it."

Huffman said the project has taught her what it takes to run a school district. "I came in as an angry parent ... then I got tired of hearing myself complain." She said Thomas listened to her, and agreed there was a way to make the school better. "I learned a lot about problems in the district that parents, at one end, don't see," she said.

Huffman has more plans for the theater. The next phase is to raise money to replace the stage, and build an off-stage storage and construction area for sets.

An advisory committee has been set up to oversee future work, and manage half of the rental proceeds, which are earmarked for the theater's maintenance.

Huffman said she hopes the theater can become a venue for community functions and performances. "I want the community to embrace this," she said, because they can use it.

Warner said the project has taught her students that "you can't just sit around and wait for somebody else to do it. ... Who would've thought? We raised over \$40,000, primarily through the kids, parents and alumni. It's been very empowering for everybody."

Anyone interested in donating to the Little Theater renovation project can contact Harbor High School at 429-3810.