

UC SANTA BARBARA

THE *Current*

September 6, 2012

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University Religious Conference Legacy Lives On With URC Interfaith Fund at UCSB

When the University Religious Conference (URC) of Santa Barbara was founded in Isla Vista in 1957, its aim was to support UC Santa Barbara students by fostering interfaith activity and cross-cultural dialogue. Now defunct as an organization, the URC's legacy lives on -- thanks to its unique dissolution, which made provisions for the campus and Isla Vista community that are beginning to bear fruit.

Deciding in 2011 to shut its proverbial and actual doors -- the URC built the acronym-sharing University Religious Center in Isla Vista in the early 1960's -- the group wanted to do so in a way that would see its devotion to students extended. The result? The bricks-and-mortar URC was sold to the Santa Barbara Student Housing Cooperative (SB Co-op), which has just begun renovating the building into a residence that will house 18 students, starting in January 2013. The unique arrangement sees the UCSB Foundation receiving mortgage payments that are in turn being gifted to students and campus interfaith programs.

The new URC Interfaith Fund at UCSB will annually provide the MultiCultural Center and the Office of Student Life's nascent CommUnity Grants initiative a percentage of those payments to support cross-cultural events. A large portion will be given to the Office of Financial Aid and Scholarships to fund scholarships for eligible UCSB undergrads living at SB Co-op's new student house. And SB Co-op will see some of

its money returned, earmarked for relevant activities at that new residence, called Thomas Merton: An Interfaith Cooperative House, named for the Catholic priest, author, and advocate for interfaith understanding.

"It was a bittersweet decision to dissolve -- the URC was no longer as vital an asset as it once was, and started to lack dynamic participation -- but we looked at this as a tremendous possibility to leave a legacy," said Catherine Boyer, a former member of the URC's board of directors, longtime UCSB liaison to Isla Vista, and current acting director of Student Affairs Grants and Development. "Of course it's sad to see the end of a dream, and of an institution in the community, but it's also exciting to see what's happening now. The URC will carry on to the future with what the Co-op and the other recipients will do with it."

What the Co-op will do is, in part, well under way. The group's renovation of the former URC building, at 777 Camino Pescadero, is now in the construction phase. The original shell and foundation remain, but the former community meeting place is being converted into a home for students that will offer and support educational, cultural, and social programs to explore and promote interfaith understanding and social justice.

"It is an honor and a wonderful opportunity for the Santa Barbara Student Housing Co-op to be able to partner with the University Religious Center to continue its legacy in the form of the Thomas Merton House, our newest affordable housing co-op," said Jeffrey Bessmer, the cooperative's executive director. "As we have grown our co-op over the last four decades, so too will this interfaith institution grow and connect folks from our many different faith backgrounds in a healthy collaborative environment."

Such connections and collaboration are also the goal of the campus CommUnity Grants program, which is using its annual disbursement from the Interfaith Fund to offer unrestricted micro grants of up to \$500 to student organizations for cooperative events that foster discourse across diverse communities. In its inaugural outing -- the program launched in January 2012 -- CommUnity Grants supported more than 50 campus groups by funding 23 events with grants totaling nearly \$7,000.

"We're not typically in a position to think about ways we can give away money, but this money from the URC made that possible," said Miles Ashlock, associate director

in the Office of Student Life. "We are so thankful to the URC for their thoughtfulness in the dissolution of the organization, and their generosity. Most organizations can't say they made a difference when they ended, but URC went out with a bang. And the students are jumping into this wholeheartedly. We're providing the funding but they're coming up with the ideas and establishing links with different communities. I really think this initiative can change the culture of student programming."

It will also invigorate offerings from the UCSB MultiCultural Center (MCC), said director Zaveeni Khan-Marcus. In its first URC Interfaith Fund endeavor, the MCC hosted a lecture and dinner discussion focused on empathy and selfless giving, featuring local leaders from a variety of faiths mixing with students and community members. "It really upheld the vision of the URC in terms of interfaith understanding and communication," Khan-Marcus said of the event, noting that more such URC-inspired events are in the MCC's near future.

But the URC's impact is sure to be felt in the long term as well. When the SB Co-op makes its final balloon payment in 2021, net proceeds will create a permanent endowment, The URC Interfaith Scholarship Fund, for financially needy undergrads with a declared major or minor in Religious Studies.

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† Top image: The University Religious Conference's Isla Vista-based center in an undated photo taken during its original construction at 777 Camino Pescadero.

Image courtesy of URC Board of Directors

†† Middle image: Student Housing Co-op executive director Jeff Bessmer outside the URC in August. The familiar building is now under construction and being made-over as the Co-op's new Thomas Merton House, which is slated to open in January 2013.

Credit: George Foulsham

††† Bottom image: Standing inside the now-gutted URC building, SB Co-op's Jeffrey Bessmer details plans for converting the former meeting place into an interfaith residence for 18 students.

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