

# Rancho Los Alamitos restoring piece of history

By Pamela Hale-Burns, Staff Writer

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*Pamela Seager, executive director of the Rancho Los Alamitos Foundation, stands in front of a historic barn that is being turned into the Rancho's Education Center. The center is scheduled to open in May. (Rancho Los Alamitos Foundation)*

LONG BEACH — Rancho Los Alamitos "is a place for all time and for everybody," says Pamela Seager, executive director of the Rancho's foundation.

Construction on a 25-year project of which Seager has been a part from the start is nearing completion at the 7.5-acre historic site.

"It's been a long time in the making," Seager said. "When we first came, the place was very run down and it was very apparent that the site needed a master plan."

As part of that plan, everything on site was either fixed or restored. However, the barn, now the Education Center, was the biggest part of the plan, Seager said.

The Education Center is scheduled to open next May and will represent the mission of Rancho Los Alamitos - public education using the history and physical resources of the site to explore the evolution and cultural ecology of Southern California in ways relevant to contemporary audiences, Seager said.

"For the first time, there will be a place where you can look at how we got to where we are today, the evolution of the region, the evolution of Long Beach and understand what the choices were, how they were made and who made them," she said. "It will not only look at prominent owners and politicians, but the people who called this place home for more than 1,500 years - that includes the Native American community, the Hispanic community, all the immigrant farm workers and the pioneer families who came here looking for the California dream."

In late 2010, construction workers placed the historic barn atop the new foundation for the future home of the Education Center.

"We have gradually and steadily work through the process. The site has extraordinary resources so we can approach most of our projects from the bases of reality because we've got historic photos and documents to tell us what really happened," Seager said. "We don't have to guess or make it up."

According to Seager, almost everything at the Rancho is original. The land on which it is located has been inhabited continuously since A.D. 500, she said.

The tiny surviving piece of the original 300,000-acre Los Coyotes tract is also the ancestral village site of Povuu'ngna, and in creation stories, the sacred birthplace of the native Tongva people of the Los Angeles Basin.

"The beginnings of the site are strongly rooted in Povuu'ngna, which is the Tongva ceremonial place of emergence," she said. "We still work very actively with the native community, who still consider this their place of emergence."

In 1968, the Bixby Family, who at the time had owned the Rancho for more than 90 years, donated the site (an adobe house and its contents, the gardens, and the barn's structures and collections) to Long Beach. The Deed of Gift stipulated that the site would be maintained in the existing condition, relevant to the people of its time.

"This is not only sacred ground, think of all those people who walked over it; their blood, sweat and tears, literally, to create the place where we are standing today," said Claudia Jurmain in a Press-Telegram interview in 2010. "And no one owns it, we all own it."

Jurmain, who co-authored the recently released book "Rancho Los Alamitos, Ever Changing, Always the Same," is helping to keep the site's history alive.

"This project means that the past is relevant today. Too often we live today as if it's the only moment in time," she said. "But when you hear those stories and see the faces and voices of

people and their relations to the nature of this place, you realize that that is a story that we are a part of."

Jurmain's publication includes stories too numerable to make the exhibits in the Education Center, said Seager.

"We felt that there was so much information that Claudia had uncovered and looked at and sorted through in order to develop the exhibit and film and there was no way to share all that information," said Seager.

Throughout its history, the Rancho has always given people what they've needed, Seager said.

"People needed water, there was water here. Oil was found here, open land was found here, a place to live, the climate," she said. "Today, it's sometimes a place to step back from an urban environment for peace and tranquility in an historically open space."

It's that spirit that continues to keep the Rancho alive, Seager said.

"It's always had that resilience. It's a remarkable place and I'm very glad to have been a part of (this project), but it's the place that did it," she said. "The thing about preservation and working with historic material is, it makes you humble and you have to have humility because you've got to let it speak for itself. You can't impose false history. Let the place, it's stories and it's people have their own voice."

The Historic Ranch and Gardens are free and open to the public four days a week. For more information go to [www.rancholosalamitos.com](http://www.rancholosalamitos.com).

[pam.hale@presstelegram.com](mailto:pam.hale@presstelegram.com), 562-499-1476

## **Rancho Los Alamitos**

Hours: 1-5 p.m., Wednesday through Sunday

Admission: Free

Tours: Guided tours of ranch house and barns start every 30 minutes with the last tour at 4 p.m. Garden tours are self guided. Group, special interest and school tours are by appointment.

Suggestions: Guests should wear comfortable, low-heeled shoes.

Programs: Educational programs and special events throughout the year.

For membership or volunteer information: Rancho Los Alamitos Foundation, 6400 Bixby Hill Road, Long Beach, 90815, or [www.rancholosalamitos.com](http://www.rancholosalamitos.com).