



President Nikias kicks off the annual *Los Angeles Times* Festival of Books at USC. This growing, multifaceted celebration formerly hosted by UCLA now gives USC the opportunity to showcase the beauty and resources of its University Park Campus to more than 150,000 visitors every year.



Chapter 12

The Closest of Neighbors

USC and Its City

USC was founded in 1880 to help fuel the development of Los Angeles—then a small village with a population of less than 12,000—into a major city with a distinct character. However, as a result of that very growth, university leaders a generation later would explore whether the school should move outside the city limits, in order to have more room to expand beyond the bustling metropolis.

Following these deliberations, however, in 1917 USC's fourth president, George F. Bovard, made a historic announcement. "There are two kinds of institutions, both of which have their place," he wrote. "One is the small college, placed by itself and sufficient to itself, with country surroundings and its campus remote from the city. The other is the city institution—the university which tries to solve the problems of the city."

USC, then, was to remain that latter type of institution. In the following decades, the question would occasionally arise as to whether the university would do well to relocate to more pastoral surroundings miles from the city center. Each time, its leadership reaffirmed the commitment of Judge Widney and President Bovard to be an anchor for Los Angeles. The civil unrest in the city in the early 1990s posed a challenge, as some experts warned that the region seemed unpromising for the recruitment of top students and faculty. USC's response was, characteristically, to focus on identifying and capitalizing on the distinctive advantages that were inherent in its setting, in the arenas of both academia and public service.

The university saw its location in southern Los Angeles as a prized asset for civic-minded scholars: Here lay countless opportunities to explore and improve a city that was a bellwether of urban change and a microcosm of a globalizing society.

Skeptics who believed the urban setting would be a drawback were consistently proven wrong. By 2015, USC ranked third nationally among private



The Los Angeles Times Festival of Books at USC features a health pavilion where members of the community can receive free medical screenings and consultations from university healthcare specialists.

universities in applications for its freshman class. And a substantial portion of those applicants shared the belief of the greater Trojan community—that USC’s place at the heart of Los Angeles represented an academic, cultural, and social treasure, as well as being an excellent location to begin a career.

A Growing Partnership with the Community

Over the years, USC has created hundreds of community partnerships, regularly drawing national acclaim. In their annual feature in 2000 on America’s best colleges, *Time* and *The Princeton Review* named USC their “College of the Year” in recognition of the university’s vast and innovative community service efforts. And USC typically stood at or near the top of the regular “Saviors of Our Cities” list—created to recognize schools that are the “best neighbors” in their urban settings.

Under President Nikias, the USC leadership doubled down on this culture of involvement. “A drive up Vermont Avenue does not simply show us a city. It displays to us the extraordinary span of the Pacific Rim, in microcosm,” Nikias said in his 2010 inaugural address. “We will embrace this community as a unique social laboratory, within the context of our mission in education, social science scholarship, healthcare, and public service.”

He would soon announce initiatives that would improve local K-12



Kicks for Kids, a USC student-run organization, helps local children with physical and developmental disabilities to live active and healthy lifestyles.



education, create jobs and nurture area businesses, bring high speed Internet access to families, and expand key service programs to the neighborhoods surrounding the Health Sciences Campus. In just one example, USC committed \$1 million to upgrade the nearby Hazard Recreation Center, which would include a jogging path, enhanced tennis and basketball courts, and exercise equipment. By 2015, the university was investing \$35 million annually to support efforts that served 40,000 residents in the local area.

Student and Trojan Family Involvement

In an address to the student body in the spring of 2011, Nikias urged them to “celebrate the city”—to take advantage of the unlimited opportunities around



Some 200 community residents attend an event celebrating USC's \$1 million gift to improve the Hazard Recreation Center near its Health Sciences Campus. The donation funded the addition of basketball courts, a gym, and a children's play area.

them to experience multiple cultures, to serve, to learn, and to grow.

"Even a few decades ago many Atlantic cities did not take L.A. seriously as a world city," Nikias told them, "until they realized that the fusion that you find here, from the arts and culture...to fashion and cuisine and commerce, reflects something difficult to imitate elsewhere. Increasingly, others appreciate how Los Angeles is so breathtakingly open to change, to reinvention, to forward-thinking...and to possibilities without limit."

While many urban universities are emotionally divorced from their surroundings, USC's faculty, students, and staff are personally involved. By 2015, almost two-thirds of undergraduates were volunteering and staffing the university's myriad service programs, including a remarkable 650 student-athletes who found time to give back to local schools, hospitals, and institutions. Combined, USC's employees and student body now offer more than 650,000 hours in service every year.

The Trojan Family's commitment goes beyond volunteering. USC's Good Neighbors Campaign allows its employees to contribute directly to partnerships between the university and its neighborhoods. Annual giving by faculty and staff rose from an impressive total of just under \$1 million in 2007 to \$1.6 million by 2015—by which time, some 450 employees were giving at least 1 percent of their income to the efforts funded through the campaign.

Local Economic Development

In the university's public-service priorities, economic development goes hand in hand with other local efforts. Through just one initiative, the academic community worked to help 60 small business owners develop the skills needed to procure some \$61 million in working capital, loans, and contracts. In another example, a nearby hiring program was able to put \$5 million in USC salaries back into the local economy annually.



Celebrating the beginnings of USC Village (clockwise from top left): In December 2012, community members bedecked in USC cardinal colors show their enthusiasm for the proposal; Senior Vice President for University Relations Tom Sayles, who led USC's efforts to build support for the project, shakes hands with Los Angeles city councilmember Ed Reyes; hundreds of supporters cheer outside City Hall after the council approved the plans with a unanimous vote.

In 2013, the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corp. (LAEDC) recognized USC with an Eddy Award for its contributions to the region's vitality—as a research institution, for its longtime role as the largest private employer in the city, and for its plans to establish the \$650 million USC Village, which would bring 12,000 jobs to the South Los Angeles area, 8,000 of which would be permanent.

The USC Village development, now underway and scheduled for completion in 2017, will create a vibrant retail and housing center in the heart of the campus. At a September 2014 groundbreaking ceremony, Nikias suggested the initiative was a sign of the interdependence of “town and gown” in the region:

For USC and Los Angeles to make the next step forward, there



was the need for this moment to come about. USC's first-rate faculty and first-rate student body need first-rate facilities. And Los Angeles needs its private university, its largest private employer, to be at its best...and at its most productive and influential. We recognized, together, how our community could receive a huge benefit from the new retail space, which could provide jobs and services to so many people locally.

USC's goals for enriching the area went beyond adding traditional jobs: They also included efforts to encourage development in emerging industries and sectors of the economy. In early 2015, Nikias convened a regional summit, drawing together scores of business, academic, and government leaders to



From current students to alumni, the Trojan Family remains committed to local service. As part of the annual Community Bowl, organized by the Trojan Athletic Parents Association, 150 student-athletes a year mentor local children and work alongside them to beautify their schools.



Retired judge James Reese graduated from the USC Gould School of Law in 1946, courtesy of the GI Bill. He worked with his alma mater to create Kinder 2 College, a unique program dedicated to ensuring that boys from disadvantaged backgrounds gain reading skills that are crucial to lifelong success.

advance a plan for a major biotechnology park in the area. This endeavor, he said, would potentially stimulate thousands of additional jobs, attract venture capital funding and new businesses, and unleash innovation.

A Community Crossroads

The *Los Angeles Times* Festival of Books has become an acclaimed literary gathering since its founding in 1996. For its first 15 years, the event was hosted by UCLA, which meant that more than 100,000 visitors from Southern California and across the nation would travel to its Westwood campus over two springtime days each year.

When budget cuts at UCLA compelled it to scale back its commitment to the book festival, USC leaders recognized that hosting the event could allow them to introduce the beauty, energy, and walkability of the University Park Campus to a sizable audience. The warmth of the ever-growing campus had long been a chief selling point to visiting prospective students and their families; the time seemed right to welcome even more outsiders. USC was also in a position to offer the organizers of the festival far more support and extensions than they had previously enjoyed. In the spring of 2011, the Festival of Books reappeared in the heart of Los Angeles, enabling USC to showcase its campus, as well as many of its best scholars, to some 150,000 attendees.



USC pledged an annual gift of \$100,000 in 2014 to support the Los Angeles Police Department's cadet program. President Nikias regularly hosts and addresses the graduating classes of cadets.

USC organizers also helped coordinate a dizzying array of programs, panels, workshops, lectures, and other events—some 100 in total, spread across the 230-acre campus. The festival has expanded to become far more than a literary showcase, now including a variety of musical, culinary, and cultural offerings, as well as health screenings and community services. The Southern California and literary communities warmly embraced the new location of the expo, which emerged as the biggest of its kind in America, as well as one of the most admired. “This gigantatron gathering of readers, authors, book sellers, panelists, artists, and literary experts is one of the best known anywhere,” gushed one review from NBC online.

In another sign of commitment to its local neighborhoods, USC took under its wing those entrusted with keeping the city secure, hosting commencement ceremonies for the LAPD Cadet Leadership Program. President Nikias regularly delivered keynote addresses to the graduating cadets. In 2014, USC pledged a \$100,000 annual gift to support the growing youth academy.

“This support speaks to USC’s confidence in these young women and men, and our shared commitment—along with LAPD—to our community and its youth,” Nikias said in announcing the award. “These cadets are our future. Look at them. It’s America’s future,” he said. “The USC community stands with them, not only today but every day for the many years to come.”



Trojan tight end Chris Willson rallies the troops during a visit by several USC football players to 186th Street School in 2015.



School Is In: Expanding Educational Opportunities

Just as education is at the core of USC's overall priorities, it remains a cornerstone of the university's community service work. A crucial component involves improving K-12 learning opportunities for children attending nearby schools. By 2015, as part of its Family of Schools initiative, USC had "adopted" 15 neighborhood elementary, middle, and high schools, freely sharing its extensive educational resources. More than 3,000 local students were enrolled in a variety of college access programs, as well as more than 500 children in preschool offerings.

The Neighborhood Academic Initiative (NAI) also has emerged over the years as a signature USC effort in K-12 preparation. More than 800 students



RIGHT: President Nikias visits students at the James A. Foshay Learning Center, part of the USC Family of Schools. The university currently partners with 15 local schools through the program to enhance education for more than 17,000 young people, with participation from some 4,500 Trojan students, faculty, and staff.



in the University Park area have successfully completed the program since its launch in 1991; it boasts a 99-percent success rate in graduating its participants from high school and sending them off to college. Those who manage to earn direct admission to USC enroll as freshmen the next fall, supported by full-expense scholarships; other NAI students have gone on to attend Harvard, Penn, and West Point, among other schools. In a typical year, a few dozen young people who, without NAI, may have been challenged to finish high school at all, find themselves able—and equipped—to attend one of the nation’s most prestigious private universities. Many participants who have graduated from USC return to the program as volunteers, to mentor a new generation of scholars and coach the students’ parents.

In 2014, a record 65 high school seniors graduated from NAI. The following year, Trustee Joan Payden made a landmark \$5 million donation that would dramatically expand the range and scope of the program’s academic services. The gift enabled NAI to serve an additional 600 schoolchildren from the neighborhoods surrounding the Health Sciences Campus, and also established the Joan A. Payden Student Academy.

Extending the Trojan Family

In the end, USC’s efforts are driven by a public-service ethos rarely seen even at the nation’s historic land-grant public institutions. And essential to that ethos is a belief in the power of family: The Trojan Family needs to be broad and open, creating as much opportunity as possible. The success of its community endeavors is exemplified by the story of Isidra Nava Garcia, a mother who has been involved with NAI for years. In 2014, she celebrated the graduation of her third child from the program; all three siblings will be studying at the university concurrently. “We will always be part of NAI,” she said. “We are a USC family.”

LEFT: USC undergraduates run a program teaching civic engagement and entrepreneurship to local schoolchildren. A student at Lou Dantzler Preparatory Charter School eagerly participates in one session.