

Ventura County Star

'Unmatched creativity' at Reagan Library's Discovery Center

Students play roles at Discovery Center

By [Cheri Carlson \(Contact\)](#)

Monday, June 9, 2008



Jen Edney / Special to the Star

Former first lady Nancy Reagan is joined by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, left, received lunch boxes from the students at Lang Ranch School during the opening of the Air Force One Discovery Center on Sunday.



Jen Edney / Special to the Star

Dean McMillan, 11, playing Ronald Reagan, makes a final decision during a simulation about the Grenada invasion at the Reagan Library in Simi Valley.

As Nancy Reagan watched from a seat on the stage, hundreds celebrated the opening of an interactive youth exhibit at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum on Sunday, including about three dozen Thousand Oaks students who became some of the first to test it.

"Tonight is about the children and their future," said R. Duke Blackwood, executive director of the library and the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation. "This evening, we inaugurate your Discovery Center, which will be recognized across the country as a symbol of unmatched creativity in education, technology and achievement."

Rather than reading about history in a textbook, the Air Force One Discovery Center allows fifth- through eighth-grade students to participate in role-playing exercises on four permanent sets: the Oval Office; the Command Decision Center, modeled after the USS Ronald Reagan; a White House press room; and an Air Force One simulator.

It's unique in that it "is integrated around public service, around civics ... (and) is knitted together in such an engaging way," said U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, on hand to celebrate the opening alongside Reagan. "It's a wow.' It's terrific."

Spellings said Sunday that she has traveled to many schools and educational programs throughout the country but has yet to see anything like the Discovery Center. She spoke about the federal No Child Left Behind Act and the need for accountability in education, saying she would be excited to see future data on how Discovery Center helps students learn.

"I'm sure it will be wildly successful," she said.

About three dozen fifth-graders from Lang Ranch School in Thousand Oaks agreed.

From the moment they entered the exhibit Sunday, they were no longer schoolchildren, but the president, his Cabinet members, military generals and White House reporters. They had to decide whether to invade Grenada in 1983, how to rescue hundreds of U.S. citizens there and whether to try to overthrow the government.

Dean McMillan, 11, sat behind the "president's desk" Sunday, a red phone inches from his left hand, deciding whether to send troops to Grenada. His goal: to come to the same decisions President Reagan did more than two decades ago.

Sometimes he did; sometimes he didn't, but in the end, the fifth-grader said he learned a lot.

"I didn't know we had to go through all those decisions," he said. "I thought it was a really great experience."

The program was designed to immerse students in the experience, as they learn how government works and how decisions are made. Officials said the interactive environment will help the information stick with the kids, more than what they could learn by listening to someone speak about the events or reading about them in a book.

"Our goal is to inspire young people, to ignite their spirit of inquiry and to educate them to meet the challenges and opportunities before them," Blackwood said.

Plans to develop the center were first announced last year, after the library received a \$3.5 million grant from the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation, a national philanthropic organization founded in 1954 by the late media entrepreneur for whom it is named.

Several foundation officials were at the official opening Sunday and also lauded the program.

Blackwood announced Sunday that the Reynolds Foundation had agreed to donate an additional \$5.2 million to the project, which will partly be used to enhance the program's technology and help with schools' travel expenses.

The scholarships will be an important part of the center's success, said Steven L. Anderson, foundation president. Schools are cutting transportation expenses and extra-curricular activities, he said, and

foundation officials don't want participants to be limited to students in affluent schools or those who have the ability to pay for the cost of travel themselves.

"We're hoping to make the program available to every fifth- through eighth-grade student in California," he said.

Library officials have said the exhibit will bring in up to five classes a day, and appointments for teachers to take their classes through the exhibit are filling up.

Teachers interested in booking a class trip should e-mail afodiscovery@reaganfoundation.org.