

# A bittersweet return for Baca

Among those at the dedication of the Hall of Justice in downtown L.A. is the former sheriff, who was instrumental in its renovation

BY CINDY CHANG

As photographers jostled for position, Los Angeles County officials posed in front of a plaque that bore their names outside an iconic building.

For years to come, people who enter the Hall of Justice will be reminded of the role those officials played in turning the downtown Los Angeles landmark from an earthquake-damaged husk back into a law enforcement hub.

But standing nearby, without a single camera lens trained on him,

was the man who perhaps more than anyone else made the \$231-million seismic retrofit and renovation happen.

Instrumental in securing support and funding for the project, former Sheriff Lee Baca also left his mark on the historic edifice. For years, even as problems festered in his department's jails, Baca obsessed over the tiniest of details, from the bathroom tiles in the women's restroom to the color of the window trim.

He suddenly retired before his name could be etched on the building — one more piece of fallout

from the scandals that broke during his watch. Soon, as sheriff's and district attorney's officials move in, someone else will occupy the office Baca so carefully designed for himself.

His appearance at a dedication ceremony for the building last week was a bittersweet moment for the man who had invested so much in the project.

"There isn't anything about this building that I didn't have my hand in," Baca said.

After the ceremony, as crowds surged into the Beaux Arts-style Hall of Justice's grand lobby, with

its gilded arches and ornate ceiling, Baca was no longer alone. Tall and rail-thin in a dark pinstriped suit, accompanied by his wife, Carol, he accepted a hug from just about everyone who passed.

Many Sheriff's Department veterans told him they were sworn in there, before the Northridge earthquake rendered the building uninhabitable for two decades.

Baca, too, remembers walking up the main steps on Spring Street, cater-corner from City Hall, as a young deputy sheriff reporting for his first day of work in 1965. The

[See Baca, A30]



# Former sheriff left his imprint

[Baca, from A29] building's 14-story granite facade left him awe-struck at the higher meaning of his new job, he recalled.

In those days, thousands of jail inmates occupied the upper floors. The trials of Charles Manson and Sirhan Sirhan took place in the Hall of Justice's courtrooms. But as the building, which dates from 1925, continued to accumulate history, it was deteriorating physically.

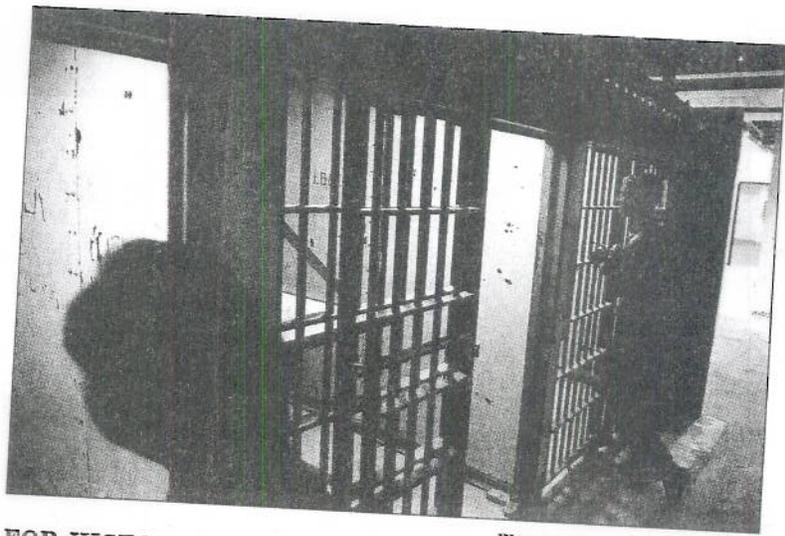
In 1993, the Sheriff's Department moved its headquarters to a modern building on a hilltop in Monterey Park. The following year, the earthquake dealt the Hall of Justice what appeared to be a death blow.

While others advocated mothballing it because of the expected cost of renovation, Baca made it one of his pet projects after he was elected sheriff in 1998. More than a decade later, in 2011, the county Board of Supervisors approved a financing plan that relies on savings from canceled leases after about 1,500 employees relocate to the Hall of Justice.

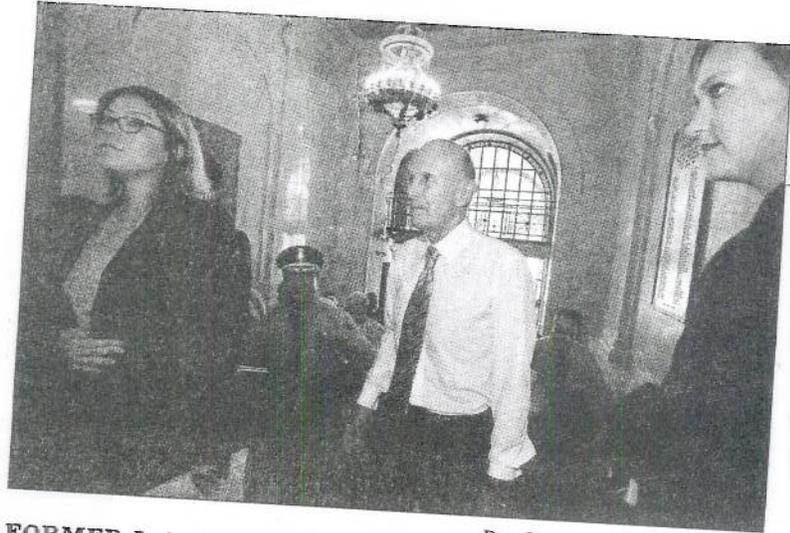
As the project got under way, Baca turned his attention to aesthetics. The window frames would be a putty green to match the trim at City Hall, which was built with granite from the same quarry. The carpet would be beige with darker accents. The parking lot had to blend in with the main structure. An atrium at the building's center would give employees an outdoor space to have lunch.

"He put a lot of effort into this, and for him not to be there at the end, I think it's a shame," said Michael Samsing, an asset planner in the county's chief executive office. "If it wasn't for him, this building wouldn't be where it is."

While he was putting his



**FOR HISTORICAL REASONS**, a jail cell that once housed cult leader and murderer Charles Manson is left untouched. WALLY SKALIJ Los Angeles Times



**FORMER L.A. COUNTY Sheriff Lee Baca** inside the hall. He suddenly retired before his name could be etched on the building. DON BARTLETTI Los Angeles Times

Photographs by DON BARTLETTI Los Angeles Times

**LEE BACA** walks up a staircase at the Hall of Justice, which was heavily damaged in the 1994 Northridge quake. While others advocated mothballing the building because of the expected cost of renovation, Baca made it one of his pet projects after he was elected sheriff in 1998

personal stamp on the Hall of Justice, Baca was having trouble managing the nation's largest county jail system. A wide-ranging FBI probe of the jails led to the criminal conviction of seven sheriff's officials for obstruction of justice and charges against several others accused of assaulting inmates or visitors.

Sheriff's commander Bob Olmsted, now retired, said that as a supervisor in the jails, he rarely saw Baca.

"Would a CEO of IBM or Apple be so interested and concerned about the color of the carpeting as opposed to what the true mission of the operation is?" said Olmsted, an outspoken critic of Baca's administration. "If you get lost in the minutiae and minor details, you lose track of big issues, like mental health and jail abuse."

Baca's interest in architecture and interior design extended to the three sheriff's stations built during his tenure. In 2010, he was not pleased with the bathroom



**A CROWD** gathers at the Spring Street entrance for the dedication of the building, which dates to 1925.

tiles or the toilet stall partitions at the new South Los Angeles station. At a cost of more than \$22,000, he ripped out the fixtures and installed ones more to his liking.

The Hall of Justice bathrooms are finished in gray tile that Baca picked himself.

Baca said he tried to steer

the jails in a different direction but encountered resistance. "I paid a lot of attention to the jails," he said. "The jails did not pay enough attention to me."

From an office on the Hall of Justice's eighth floor, the next sheriff will look northeast across Los Angeles County, with Chinatown and Dodger Stadium in the fore-

ground and the San Gabriel Mountains in the distance.

Previous sheriffs occupied the same corner but on the second floor. Baca said he moved the office to a higher perch to give the sheriff a view of the people he or she serves. "They are working hard in their jobs, they are traveling this incredible network of roads and freeways, and your job is to serve them, not sit in your office and just do administrative work," Baca said.

Interim Sheriff John Scott, who was sworn in at the Hall of Justice in 1969, will spend his last day, Dec. 1, there as a symbolic gesture, even though the rest of the department will not move in until early next year. It was Scott's name, not Baca's, that went on the dedication plaque.

The eighth-floor office's next occupant will be one of two men facing off in the Nov. 4 sheriff's election: retired Undersheriff Paul Tanaka, who spent 31 years in the department, or Jim McDon-

nell, an LAPD veteran who is chief of police in Long Beach.

Standing on the carpet he chose, Baca pointed out the translucent panels in the secretaries' area, designed to admit light from an adjacent hallway. As he explained his need for multiple secretaries, he lapsed into the present tense.

"I get emails, phone calls, letters — 25 to 30 invitation a day," he said.

Since his retirement in January, Baca has been working in the garden of his 1928 Mediterranean house in San Marino. At age 72, he runs six to eight miles each morning, has learned how to use a computer and is reading a biography of Mark Twain.

As he left the Hall of Justice behind, he pronounced himself satisfied.

"I wanted it to be airy and light, with natural light coming in, and I think I've achieved that," he said.

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IRFAN KHAN Los Angeles Times

**CATHERINE PRATT** says: "I used to lecture them.... I tried to explain to them how short the life span for people in prostitution is. And they were not at all interested. It really didn't resonate with them at all."

# L.A. County seeking to aid child prostitutes

*Fri 10-10-14 LA Times*

BY GARRETT THEROLF

The teenage girl slouched in her baggy orange detention uniform for yet another court hearing in her prostitution case.

From the bench, Commissioner Catherine Pratt called out a sunny "hello," trying to create a human bond for a girl who has few of them.

"You're beginning to look pregnant," Pratt said. "Before, I didn't even notice."

The girl told the commissioner that she felt trapped at juvenile hall, worrying by day that she would give birth behind bars, dreaming at night of Nutella and hot Cheetos.

"They don't even give me

any sugar," she said. "It ain't right."

Pratt told the girl that if she would stop running back to the streets, Pratt would place her in a group home where she could eat what she wants, keep her child out of foster care and hold the baby shower she fantasizes about.

"You'll have to let me know when it is. I'd like to go," Pratt said, prompting a startled chuckle from the girl. "You're not doing this alone. We're going to help you."

The humble, affirming approach of Pratt's Compton courtroom began as an experiment three years ago, when she applied for grant money to provide profes-

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[Prostitutes, from A1]  
sional help for the young prostitutes and she set aside Tuesdays to focus exclusively on sex trafficking cases.

Advocates from at least three charities providing mentors, educational liaisons and lawyers sit in the jury box of Pratt's courtroom to connect with youths as soon as the need arises.

Los Angeles County supervisors launched a plan this year that adopts Pratt's ethos, and social workers, police officers and others are being trained to take a softer approach to the children involved in prostitution. They are instructed to treat these young prostitutes as victims rather than perpetrators.

Police officers are receiving training in many parts of the county to call the child abuse hotline when they find children engaged in prostitution instead of booking them for a crime. County officials expect that hundreds of youths will be diverted from juvenile detention facilities in favor of foster care placements.

"I used to lecture them," Pratt said. "You're making bad choices. This is dangerous." I tried to explain to them how short the life span for people in prostitution is. And they were not at all interested. It really didn't resonate with them at all."

A personal relationship and trust have to be developed first, she said, and she measures her progress in the pictures, emails and poems that some of the youths send her.

Still, there is risk.

More than 60% of Los Angeles County's children arrested for prostitution had previously come to the attention of the county's Department of Children and Family Services, and the foster care system's group homes have become one of most frequent gateways to the sex trade because the children there have fewer family ties and pimps target them for recruitment.

But the foster care system is currently the county's only alternative to juvenile detention facilities.

"It's like we're building a bridge and trying to walk across it at the same time," said Fesia Davenport, the chief deputy director of the Department of Children and

'I wouldn't say it has been a roaring success but for the first time in this area, people feel like there is some hope, and it can often look really hopeless.'

— CATHERINE PRATT  
on handling prostitution cases

Family Services.

Adding urgency to the work is the belief that criminal gangs are increasingly turning to the lucrative human trafficking trade. A drug is sold once, but a child is sold over and over, advocates note.

Pratt, a former attorney for Wall Street firms, was drawn to public service years ago after her sister was killed when she stayed in an abusive relationship.

Pratt initially became involved in the battered women's movement, advocating for increased services to victims of rape and domestic violence, and harsher punishment for abusers.

After leaving private practice, she became an attorney for the county, petitioning the court to remove children from abusive parents, and she was later appointed a court commissioner, deciding juvenile delinquency cases. When children involved in prostitution arrived in her courtroom, she recognized parallels to her sister.

"These kids come from a rough background and also made some bad choices, but I really believe that you should have the opportunity to live down your bad choices," Pratt said.

Since her experimental courtroom began in 2011, the average number of days a child spends in juvenile detention has dropped from 35 days to 20 days, 73% of the children have not been re-arrested and 22% remained in contact with a member of Pratt's support team even after the case was closed and they were no longer obligated to maintain touch.

[See Prostitutes, A13]

[Prostitutes, from A12]

But getting the children to achieve stability in a single foster care setting and off the streets has been less successful. The data don't show any movement on that goal.

"I wouldn't say it has been a roaring success," Pratt said, "but for the first time in this area, people feel like there is some hope, and it can often look really hopeless."

Survivors of child sex trafficking are conflicted: They are gratified that the issue is receiving attention through television talk shows, campus marches and politicians, but they worry about whether the county's new efforts will help.

Amy Ayoub, who became a successful businesswoman after growing up being sexually exploited by a pimp, was recently appointed by Congress to a commission to eliminate child abuse fatalities.

"I believe that there are a lot of well-intentioned people, but I am absolutely frightened that this can do more harm than good," Ayoub said. "It seems like they are looking at existing agencies and processes to deal with this instead of taking a step back and looking at the victims and the needs and saying we need to come up with something new."

County officials share her trepidation but decided to go forward nevertheless. Early last year, the Board of Supervisors ordered staffers to draft a plan to identify and help children involved in prostitution. But the county blueprint was recently delivered more than five months late with key questions unresolved.

The county spent months trying to determine whether foster children can be legally sent to locked facilities to prevent them from returning to their pimps before treatment begins. County lawyers finally concluded that current law would not allow it unless they are charged with a crime.

County officials are now debating whether to ask Sacramento lawmakers to change the law.

"I don't think locked facilities are the answer for most of our kids, but it might be helpful to have it as an option in some cases," Davenport said.

Complicating the work further was a determination that there are no treatment methods with evidence of success.

Pratt oversees the cases of 102 children who have been involved in prostitution, and she said she tries to develop individualized plans for each. About a third are in juvenile detention facilities; another third are in foster care; and the rest have run away, she said.

For some children, the commissioner said, the county has learned that a foster care placement out of state works best to break the bond with pimps — but cooperation from the child is a key.

"When we first used the out-of-state group homes, we did not have the buy-in of the kids. They can run from a facility in Iowa just as easily as they can run from a facility in Los Angeles," she said.

The move away from incarceration has critics who believe children will use the freedom of unlocked facilities to spend more time on the streets.

A woman from Culver City adopted her daughter through foster care only to see her arrested numerous times for prostitution. The woman, whose name is not being used because it might identify the 17-year-old, said she reluctantly preferred it when the girl was sent to juvenile hall because she knew she was safe from harm.

But Pratt sent the daughter to foster care placements, and she quickly ran

# Seeking to aid child prostitutes

back to the streets.

Another mother, a Los Angeles bus driver, has a daughter who was arrested for prostitution. The daughter sometimes runs away from the group homes where Pratt assigns her, but she is returning more quickly.

The girl told the court that she disappeared for two days recently because another girl "jumped her" and threw trash at her. Pratt praised the girl for calling authorities soon after her

disappearance. "Do you feel like you need to get out of the group home right away?" Pratt asked. "I want to support you."

The girl, knowing the only other immediate option was juvenile hall, agreed to return to the group home.

In the hallway outside the courtroom, her mother praised Pratt's approach. "She is very open-minded to whatever you bring and present to her," she said. "Ms. Pratt has given me

other avenues to assist her, other parents to talk to. It has been helpful."

Weeks later, Pratt said the pregnant girl at juvenile hall had just gone to a group home. Pratt hadn't received any word about whether she ran away again or if she was planning a baby shower. Doubt crept into her voice when she said, "We're hoping for good news."

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IRFAN KHAN Los Angeles Times

**LORI LEE GRAY** looks at files in Pratt's courtroom, where Tuesdays are devoted to prostitution cases.