

The Richmond Plunge reopens after 9 years

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June Albonico first swam in the Richmond Plunge 78 years ago, when she was 5 years old. Saturday, she was the first one in the massive pool, which reopened after a nine-year closure that many feared would be permanent.

"It's like coming home," Albonico said, hanging onto the edge of the pool next to her daughter and grandson.

She worked at the iconic pool more than half her life, taught a legion of young swimmers and saw five generations of her family swim under the massive trusses. Community tied this place together even as earthquakes, tight budgets and the slow wear of time threatened to bring it down.

"When people come here, it's almost like being part of a family," she said.

Saturday was a day she never thought would come.

The Richmond Municipal Natatorium, as the Plunge is officially known, was built in 1926, the tail end of an era of pool palaces spread around the nation. Most of these pools closed down, the most extravagant being San Francisco's Sutro Baths, which burned down in 1966.

But the 160-foot-by-60-foot Richmond Plunge persevered, sometimes just barely.

When the Loma Prieta quake struck in 1989, the building took a blow. In a city where money was and remains tight, there wasn't money to pay for repairs.

The city tried to close it in 1997 after inspectors warned that it was unsafe, but residents revolted. A ballot measure was put up, but voters turned that down. By 2001, the building itself sent a message.

Engineers found sagging walls, crumbled plaster and exposed reinforcing rods. Richmond closed the Plunge.

"We kept it as long as we could," Rosemary Corbin, the city's mayor from 1993 to 2001, said. "It was very sad, and the public was outraged."

But then the Richmond community started to pick up the pieces.

A medley of sources pieced together the roughly \$7.5 million in funding: individual donations, gifts from local businesses, state grants for historical preservation, a portion of a regional parks bond and city money.

It's the kind of partnership politicians always preach about, but doesn't often happen. Berkeley just closed one of its pools and is set to close another in a year because voters alone were asked to pay for a \$22.5 million parcel tax, which would have funded that city's four pools.

In Richmond, "everybody put something in," said Rich Davidson, a city engineer and project manager for the Richmond Plunge renovation. "It's a magical pool."

Others saw the comeback as a moral about something else.

"The one lesson we should keep in mind in this is, 'never give up,' " Corbin told the crowd of hundreds on Saturday.

But this resurrection was not just about bringing back the old.

True, the project restored tiling, murals, the original number of windows and other features that were present in 1926 but had been phased out in later years. But the Plunge is also a pool for the future.

The new Richmond Plunge has solar power, LED lighting above the pool, and high-efficiency water heaters, all of which will pay for themselves in energy costs in seven years.

One of the things that people remember most about the Plunge wasn't so fond: the chlorine.

"When I used to swim here, I used to go through so many bathing suits," said Jill Smith, 32, who started swimming at the Plunge when she was 7. "The chlorine would take the color out."

She had a swimsuit to take everywhere else, and one for the Plunge.

"You didn't want to ruin a new one," she said.

At the new Plunge, water is cleaned through an ultraviolet disinfectant system and saline chlorination. No more burning of the eyes or eroding of fabric.

"Healthwise and energywise, this could be the wave of the future for new pools," said Richardson.

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