

Rich Archbold: Renee Simon honored for helping to save El Dorado Park

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El Dorado Park is a sprawling 900 acres of beautiful greenery on the eastside of Long Beach, an oasis where you can relax and enjoy life in peace and quiet.

Hundreds of people use the park every day, riding their bikes, jogging, picnicking — just having a good time away from the noise and stress of city living.

But this regional treasure might never have happened without the vision, determination and courage of Renee Simon, who has become a living legend in the city she adopted when she moved here in 1951.

Last week, Simon was honored by more than 125 friends, family and community leaders at the El Dorado Park Library for her dedication to preserving the park for generations. The ceremony unveiled a plaque in her honor at the library.

“Renee Simon is such a special person in Long Beach,” said Mayor Rex Richardson. “She has had an amazing impact on Long Beach, not only with this park but with so many other positive things. It is an honor to recognize her.”

Fourth District Councilmember Daryl Supernaw said Simon was a remarkable woman whose work to preserve the park was long overdue.

The crowd gave Simon a rousing standing ovation when she was introduced by her daughter, Amy Simon Weiner.

Weiner said her mother was an inspiration to her.

“My mom has done so much for so many,” she said. “She is not one to step aside when something needs to be done to make Long Beach better.”

When she was a little girl, Weiner said, it was not easy getting her mother’s attention “because she was always on the phone doing things and helping people.”

Her mother nodded in agreement as guests laughed.

In the 1950s, Simon said, residents wanted to develop the open land as a park.

“But there were those who had different ideas,” she said. “Some developers wanted to build houses on the land. There were those who even wanted to turn the land into a concrete stadium for the Angels baseball team.

“But this sparked a group of people who were determined that this would not be so.”

Simon chaired the El Dorado Park Development Committee and worked with different organizations, including PTAs, to place a tax on the ballot in the 1960s to develop the land as a park. The tax measure, which was a 10% surcharge on property taxes for 10 years, narrowly passed.

“If that ballot measure had failed,” Simon said after the dedication ceremony, “the park would have died without funding.”

Simon thanked her friends, Lisa Andria, a member of the League of Women Voters and a transformation life coach; and Lisa Raufman, president of the National Council of Jewish Women, Greater Long Beach and West Orange County, for organizing the event.

Andria had the original idea to recognize Simon for her role in preserving the park. She said that, among many of Simon’s accomplishments, she was also a librarian and a champion of literacy.

“What better place to put a plaque honoring her than in a library,” Andria said to applause.

Brent Dennis, director of the Long Beach Parks, Recreation and Marine Department, had the good idea to place the plaque in the library, Andria said.

Other speakers included Jane Bemis of the League of Women Voters; Barbara Sosa, president of the Friends of the Library; Zoe Nicholson, member of the Long Beach Commission for Women and Girls; Susan DeLand, with the Long Beach Public Library Foundation; Griselda Suarez, with the Arts Council for Long Beach; and Julie Bartolotto of the Historical Society of Long Beach.

The speakers described Simon as fearless, energetic, creative, remarkable, smart and a trailblazer for women’s rights.

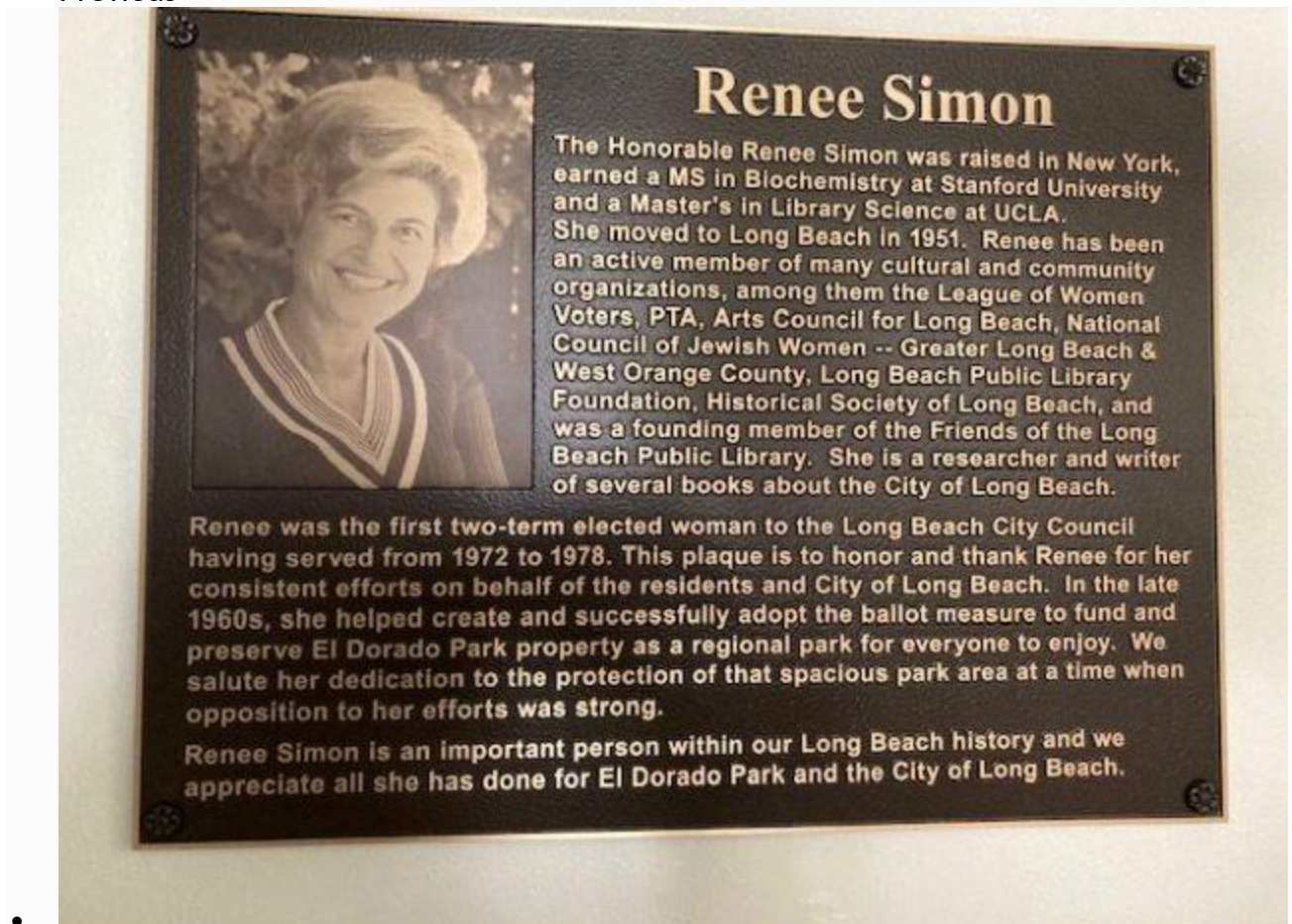
Simon would forever be “the godmother of the Commission on Women and Girls,” Nicholson said.

Last year, the City Council resurrected the idea of and established the Commission for Women and Girls, nearly half a century after Simon’s proposal died when she introduced it as a member of the City Council. Simon was the first woman elected to two terms on the Long Beach City Council in 1972.

When the applause and good wishes had died down after the dedication ceremony, I asked Simon how she felt.

“I was stunned and amazed by the ceremony and what everyone said,” she said. “I love the park. Every time I go by it, I am thrilled at what we were able to do with that land. But I didn’t do it by myself. I had a lot of help from others in preserving that land. I thank them, too.”

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- The plaque honoring Renee Simon in the El Dorado Library. (Photo by Rich Archbold, The Press-Telegram/SCNG)



- Long Beach Mayor Rex Richardson speaking to the audience at the plaque dedication ceremony honoring Renee Simon for her role in saving El Dorado Park. (Photo by Rich Archbold, The Press-Telegram/SCNG)
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Mayor Rex Richardson giving city certificate for Renee Simon. Renee's daughter, Amy Simon Weiner, is sitting in a chair and clapping. (Photo by Rich Archbold, The Press-Telegram/SCNG)



- Renee Simon with the speakers who talked about her at the plaque dedication. (Photo by Rich Archbold, The Press-Telegram/SCNG)