Visit [illegible]e at smdp.com

FRIDAY, AUGUST 31, 2007

Volume 6 Issue 248

Santa Monica Daily Press

PLEADING THE FIRST
SEE PAGE 3

Since 2001: A news odyssey

THE LET'S GO BRUINS ISSUE

Kevin Herrera kevinh@smdp.com

SPEAK UP: Kids from Venice del Play, a summer camp, take part in activist Arthur Stevens' 'The People's Voice' on Wednesday at Santa Monica Beach. Mirroring the famous 'Speakers' Corner' in London's Hyde Park, the event was a public forum for people to speak their minds.

Not holding their peace

BY KEVIN HERRERA
Daily Press Staff Writer

SM BEACH Speak for yourself.

That's the advice of activist Arthur Stevens, who, on Wednesday, launched "The People's Voice" — a public forum intended to mirror the famous "Speakers' Corner" in London's Hyde Park, complete with a microphone and a soap box for people to stand on as they express themselves any way they want.

"My concern is that two-thirds of the world's population doesn't have the protection of free speech," said Stevens, a financial advisor and insurance salesman who had an epiphany a decade ago and has been working to promote peace and prosperity ever since.

"Free speech is under attack around the world and right here in America," Stevens added. "The foundation of democracy is crumbling."

In countries such as China, North Korea and Venezuela, those who speak out against the government are silenced. Some are arrested and jailed, others tortured and killed for doing what many Americans take for granted, Stevens said.

Just this week, Russian authorities arrested 10 men in connection with the murder of famed journalist Anna Politkovskaya last year. Government officials said the murder was carried out on behalf of outsiders bent on discrediting the Kremlin, though the reporter's editors dismissed the government's assertion about motive as "political PR." Politkovskaya was a harsh critic of the Kremlin.

In New York City, the Committee to Protect Journalists released last month a list

SEE FREE SPEECH PAGE 15

Santa Monicans can sound off

FROM FREE SPEECH PAGE 3

of the 10 worst countries for journalists. The ranking of shame was based on how much press freedom had deteriorated during the last five years.

The CPJ ranked Ethiopia as the worst because the number of journalists in jail climbed from two to 18. The report noted eight newspapers were shut down in 2006, the government blocked news Web sites and two foreign reporters were expelled. The nine other worst countries were Gambia, Russia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Cuba, Pakistan, Egypt, Azerbaijan, Morocco and Thailand.

"The city of Santa Monica is famous for people speaking their minds," Stevens said, explaining why he chose a patch of grass near the beach, just off Ocean Park Boulevard, as the home for The People's Voice. "This is a great location with a beautiful view ... Santa Monica just felt right."

Stevens said he was inspired by the Speakers' Corner in London, where some of the most influential figures in world history have gathered, including Karl Marx, Frederick Engels and Lenin. Just like the famous gathering spot, The People's Voice has no entry requirements, no rules of intellectual formality and no class restrictions.

Unlike the Speakers' Corner, Stevens' event failed to attract a large crowd. Perhaps it was bad advertising or poor scheduling (the event was held at 10 a.m. on a weekday), but only a handful of people showed up to speak.

However, children from a local summer camp were playing nearby and decided to join in the fun, bringing their teachers along with them. Most of the kids talked about what they wanted to be when they grow up.

"I want to be a fireman," one young blonde boy said with a shy smile before he jumped off the box and ran back to his friends.

Stevens beamed at the sight.

"This is what it's all about," he said as he watched the children laugh and giggle when their friends took the mic. "It's important to start early and teach the younger generation about the importance of free speech. This is great."

Kids weren't the only one's who joined in unexpectedly. Two men who were walking nearby were drawn in by Stevens' words.

Jeff Keller, who took the mic to talk about the media's focus on celebrities, said he believes The Peoples' Voice is needed in today's society in which free speech has been stifled by the federal government in the wake of 9/11, as well as the monopolization of the media.

"Expressing yourself in America isn't what it used to be," Keller said while standing on a soap box. "We need to pay attention to our economic growth. The U.S. dollar isn't what it used to be. We need to wake up.

"We are in jeopardy of losing the most important war and that's the economic war."

Stevens said he is looking at hosting the event on Sundays in the near future. He wants to keep it at the beach and believes, one day soon, the grass will be covered with more than a hundred people wanting desperately to express themselves.

kevinh@smdp.com

ON THE NET

- **The People's Voice**
  thepeoplesvoicesantamonica.blogspot.com