



Photo by Jeff Hobson

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From Hardware to a Historic Home for Many

A look back at 128 years of Tacoma's United Way building

The time was ripe in Tacoma when developer and former military member Gen. John W. Sprague built the iconic Sprague Building in 1889.

Sprague arrived in Tacoma in 1870, fresh off the tracks as the general superintendent of the Northern Pacific Railroad. During his early years in the area, he foresaw an opportunity to pin Tacoma on the wholesale market map and was poised to make it happen with his experience in wholesale and retail. The conditions were perfect, he soon decided: Rail and water transport were in place and ready to receive goods from the South Sound area.

The Sprague Building became the blueprint for Tacoma wholesale warehouses for decades, and the heartily built sandstone-and-brick structure has been a stately piece of local history since.

United Way of Pierce County bought the building almost a century later and rectified it to its former beauty. Chief Financial Officer Pete Grignon — who has held the position for about 30 years — was 35 years old and had recently accepted the leadership role when United Way purchased the building. The nonprofit was formerly housed on Broadway, but wanted to own property and offer below-market rents to other nonprofits.

In the early 1990s, downtown Tacoma was desolate. Few businesses were operating on Pacific Avenue, and it was a hotspot for illicit activity. “One word that would describe it all is: seedy,” Grignon said. “Seedy and dangerous. People didn’t like to come down here. When we bought it, even our employees were concerned, and the first week we were in the building, we had police officers come down and talk to everyone about safety.”

Grignon recalls drug deals, people shooting up with needles, and prostitutes canvassing the area as regular sights during the roughly two-year construction process. But the former United Way leadership team knew the area would blossom. And it did. Among other changes, The University of Washington Tacoma settled down the street, Union Station was renovated, the Washington State History Museum moved to Pacific Avenue, and the Greater Tacoma Convention Center was built.

“(United Way) is seen as a catalyst to better the community,” he said. “When we came here, we started rehabbing this building, and it became a catalyst for other things to happen around us.”

The building was a skeleton when it was purchased by United Way, and now it’s a colorful four-floor expanse with a renovated basement that houses a daycare operated by The Children’s Museum of Tacoma. The museum moved into the first floor of the building about six years ago.

Though it has a fairly modern interior, several historic visages were kept intact. The original wooden beams poke through the floors — though they no longer support anything — and ceiling insets were added to keep the appearance of a warehouse from the exterior. To passers-by looking through the windows, the building doesn’t appear to have offices. Many of the old glass and wood windows remained intact, and in part of the basement, the old stone and brick walls are exposed, just as they were more than 100 years ago, when it was used for warehouse storage.

Grignon said it’s been incredible to watch the building and the area transform.

“Every once in a while, I have to stop myself and peer out the window and look around and just be in awe of it all, to know that we were here years ago when there was nothing really around,” he said. “It’s an amazing place to be.”