



Beyond Books: Newport Beach Celebrates Grand Opening of Witte Hall

By **Christopher Trela** - July 17, 2026



Interior of Witte Hall. Photo by Chris Trela.

After more than 10 years of planning, fundraising and construction, the Library Foundation of Newport Beach, the Newport Beach Public Library and the City of Newport Beach celebrated the Grand Opening of Witte Hall July 9 through 12.

On Thursday, July 9, Mayor Lauren Kleiman and the Newport Beach City Council cut the ribbon to Witte Hall. The next day, the Library Foundation hosted an invitation-only celebration for major donors to the Beyond Books Campaign for Witte Hall, and City and community leaders, in the Stahr Courtyard and in Witte Hall.

On Saturday, July 11, the Newport Beach Public Library held two events free to the public: an Open House and a Meet the Author presentation with surf legend and former world champion Shaun Tomson.

Then on Sunday, July 12, there was a Grand Opening Musicale Concert featuring a Cello Quartet. This was the first musical performance in the acoustically engineered hall.

According to press material, Witte Hall is the manifestation of a 12-year vision to transform the quality and character of programs and events presented by the Newport Beach Public Library, the Library Foundation and other City and community organizations. Prior to Witte Hall opening, most of the library's programming was done in the library's multi-purpose Friends room, which had a capacity of 180 with poor sight lines and acoustics.

Witte Hall will provide programming with literary, cultural, artistic, and educational value. In addition to Library and Foundation programs, Witte Hall will be available to community organizations for musical programs, conferences, films, lectures, and other programming. The City's Recreation and Senior Services Department will manage Witte Hall.

Witte Hall is on the Library grounds adjacent to Avocado Avenue. Award-winning architect Robert R. Coffee Architect + Associates designed Witte Hall. The curved roof takes its inspiration from the seashells commonly found on the beaches of Newport Beach.

Witte Hall is nearly 10,000 square feet, technologically advanced with tiered seating for 299 guests and fully ADA compliant, including assistive listening devices.



Bill Witte addressing the audience at the opening of Witte Hall. Photo by Chris Trela.

Welcome to Witte Hall

At the Friday evening VIP event, Marilyn Krahe, Chair of the Library Foundation, welcomed a capacity audience to Witte Hall.

"I can't believe it—I have the honor to be the first to welcome you to Witte Hall," Krahe told the audience. "So look left, look right, and thank everybody who's here, because this is the

room that made it happen. These are the folks from our community that made this building the crown jewel of the Civic Center, a gathering place for the exchange of ideas.”



Krahe noted that a short film detailing the history of the library and the building of Witte Hall would be screened, but “it’s the first film we’ve made, so bear with us. It’s also the first day that we have tested the audio equipment, so we could have a lot of different things happen. But I know all of you will enjoy the program regardless.”

Krahe acknowledged many of the supporters who made Witte Hall possible, and then singled out Library Foundation board member Jill Johnson-Tucker, whom she called the “one person whose persistence has been that river that carried this project from vision to stone.” After Johnson-Tucker received a standing ovation, Krahe remarked that “she has an unwavering commitment that’s had a lasting mark not only on this beautiful building but on all of us as a community.”

Johnson-Tucker told the audience that the initial idea came more than 12 years ago while on a hike with friends, chatting about how the library needed a proper venue for its ever-expanding programming.

Eventually a committee was formed to study ways to build a new lecture hall.

“A fluctuating group from the library and the city took road trips up and down the state, visiting auditoriums and lecture halls, figuring out what would best serve us in Newport Beach,” said Johnson-Tucker. “We studied every corner of this lot, and we knew that we wanted to land right here where we are, next to Avocado and close to the Friends Room, so that the courtyard could become the gathering hub that it is tonight and serve as the physical connection between the library and the hall.”

“When we finally approached the city council for approval of a conceptual design in 2019, we were incredibly fortunate to have Diane Dixon on the council, and serving as mayor no less,” continued Johnson-Tucker.

Dixon appointed a committee that reviewed design proposals. They settled on architect Robert Coffee of Newport Beach.

“He was laser focused on everything we wanted, then quietly went beyond our expectations,” said Johnson-Tucker. “We loved working with him. Tonight, you can just see and feel how right that choice was, and how his design fit our aspirations and our beach community esthetic.”



Exterior of Witte Hall. Photo by Chris Trela

The project then went to bid and the council approved it. The campaign was christened "Beyond Books," which Johnson-Tucker said was "intended to capture our aspirations of foster discovery and connection beyond the walls of our existing library."

The goal was to raise \$12 million to match the City's commitment of \$12 million, which they did through the generosity of many donors, in particular lead donors Bill Witte and Keiko Sakamoto.

"The Witte family has been woven into the life of Newport Beach for decades," noted Johnson-Tucker. "That family has given us so much generosity, their time, their passion, their resources, and we're all the richer for it. Bill and Keiko, you have supported this library and countless other organizations for years, and in this case went above and beyond with your extraordinary gift."

Newport Beach Councilmember Robyn Grant was introduced, who stated "tonight is epic. That's the word that I will use. Over a decade in the making, hundreds of members of the public, dozens of elected officials, library lovers, community activists, city staff, all working in lockstep to get us to this moment."

"One of my favorite quotes is of uncertain origin," she continued. "It is often attributed to German writer Goethe, although historians do debate its source. Regardless of who first said it, the message, as where we are today, is timeless: 'Be bold, and mighty forces will come to your aid.' Those words perfectly describe the journey that has brought us to this moment. Building Witte Hall required a bold vision, a belief that Newport Beach deserved this wonderful gathering place. That vision began with an ambitious idea that inspired a entire community. Indeed, mighty forces have come to our aid. Today, we celebrate not only

this beautiful new hall, but also the hundreds of people whose leadership and generosity have made it possible.”



Grant ended by stating that “this is not simply a hall. It’s a place where bold ideas will be shared, meaningful conversations will begin, and mighty forces will continue to come to our community. I’ll finish with another quote. This one definitely is from Goethe. His final recorded words on his deathbed were ‘more light, more light.’ Whether he intended those words as an inspiration or simply as a practical for somebody to open the window. That doesn’t really matter because they’re fitting today. Whitty Hall is, in every sense, a place that will bring more light through knowledge and curiosity and community.”

Grant then introduced Bill Witte, who talked about his family moving to Newport Beach in the 1970s and launching the Witte lecture series 30 years ago.

“My hat is off to all of you who worked hard, either as donors or volunteers or whatever, to make this happen,” said Witte. “You heard the words community and beyond books and learning, that’s what this is really all about.”

A short film detailing the history of the library and construction of Witte Hall was screened, followed by dinner on the Stahr Courtyard.

For more information on Witte Hall, visit the Library Foundation of Newport Beach at <https://libraryfoundationnb.org>.

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