

Open Door Shelter opens new Smilow Life Center

By R.A. Schuetz



Photo: Erik Trautmann / Hearst Connecticut Media

Open Door Shelter Board President Corky Stewart, State Senate Majority Leader Bob Duff, State Representative Bruce Morris (D), Open Door Shelter Executive Director Jeanette Archer-Simons, Joel Smilow, Norwalk ... more

NORWALK — People milled about before 55 Chestnut St. as the sunlight shining on the new building bounced back at them, bathing their smiles in a radiant glow. The marketing director of the Open Door Shelter, Erin McDonough, carried a ball of red ribbon, and Executive Director Jeannette Archer-Simons greeted board members and politicians.

Six months after construction began, the sparkling new Open Door Shelter facility was complete. Named the Smilow Life Center, the former glue-trap

factory had been transformed into 14 apartments for homeless and working poor individuals, two medical respite units, a health center and space for a job training program. People will begin moving in this month.

At 1:36 p.m., philanthropist Joel Smilow, after whom the center is named, cut the ribbon and the crowd clapped.

Afterward, people filed inside past a sign thanking volunteers to sit in a hall on the first floor.

“It’s amazing,” said Board Member Jon Beyman before the speeches began. “We’ve owned it for eight or nine years — so to see it come together so quickly. It’s a beautiful sight, isn’t it?”

In fact, the building, which was partially restored with tax credits available for historic structures, would not have been out of place alongside a high-end factory loft. Inside, there were exposed brick walls and wooden beams, and the large paneled windows were fitted with forest green trim.

“This is amazing, an amazing accomplishment,” said Mayor Harry Rilling in a speech. He praised the shelter’s efforts to help those in need — Open Door currently provides a roof for up to 95 individuals and families a night.

“Living here in Fairfield County, we have people that struggle. Young children that wake up in the morning hungry, go to bed the same way — and we expect them to achieve when they go to school. Families that don’t know whether they can pay their electric bill or put food on the table or pay their property taxes,” he said.

For those people, he hoped the center would be a beacon of help.

State Senate Majority Leader Bob Duff stated his conviction that the center will change lives, and Board President Curt Stewart thanked the Norwalk Police Department for their support.

Joel Smilow said that as soon as he heard of the project, he knew he would help. “If there’s anything else in the state with these kinds of overtones, just let me know. I’ll be there.”

Archer-Simons announced the building had officially passed all of its inspections and would have its first tenants by Nov. 15.

“We’ve taken an old, beat-up building, which is sort of what we do with people,” she said.

“We take people who are beat up and turn it into something that’s productive and useful. And what I love about this building is I can visualize where you’re sitting, the job training program that’s going to happen. The saws, the hammering, the plumbing training, the skills trade manufacturing training that can all happen with community partners that have said they want to do that with us.”

And at that, the roughly 70 guests who had gathered were free to check out the premises. “Pretend this is your home,” Archer-Simons entreated. “Open doors, look in closets.”

As the crowd dispersed to graze on food and explore, two of the restoration architects gazed at their work. Patricia Gill pointed to steel plates and Michael Roeder to the new walls that they had installed for structural reasons — seismic and hurricane standards had become more strict since the building was erected over a century ago.

Upstairs, Yolanda Mateo, an Open Door case manager, stood outside of one of the finished apartments. Inside, two large windows looked out onto the street, and a brand new chair, stove, and fridge were in place with the wrapping yet to be removed.

“A client of mine is actually going to live here,” she said. “This will be his apartment.”

She said that when he came to the center to choose it, he couldn't believe how high the ceilings were and how much light there was.

“He told me, ‘It’s so nice.’”

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