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SMOC opens housing in Oxford

By Ellie Oleson CORRESPONDENT



The ribbon is cut on a 16-unit sober housing facility at 266 Main St., Oxford, next to Grace Episcopal Church. (T&G Staff PHOTOS/CHRISTINE PETERSON)

OXFORD — Six years ago, when the Reverend Alfred T.K. Zadig became pastor of Grace Episcopal Church at 268 Main St., the historic houses on either side of the church were derelict eyesores, and the church had a very small congregation.

Today, the thriving church has one of the fastest growing congregations in the diocese; Rev. Zadig

and his wife, Anne Carter Zadig, live in the beautifully renovated 1840 rectory at 270 Main St., which also houses the church's offices; the house at 266 Main St. officially opened to disadvantaged residents June 17.

Rev. and Mrs. Zadig were among the town residents who joined state and local officials in celebrating the official opening of the renovated 266 Main St. house, which will soon become the home of 15 formerly homeless individuals. The first residents are expected in early July.

The Greek revival-style house at 266 Main St. has a long history, according to Jean M. O'Reilly, chairman of the Oxford Historical Commission.

She said a much smaller house was originally built at the site by John Wetherell in 1834. Local mill owner George Hodges bought the house in 1848 and remodeled and enlarged it. Mr. Hodges was instrumental in building the church next door in 1865. He and his first and second wives are buried behind the church next door.

In 1873, Mr. Hodges deeded the property to his daughter, Katharine Slater, who turned it over to the Episcopal Church the following year. The house served as the church rectory until it was sold to former local dentist Dr. William Mousseau in 1954. He returned the building to Grace Church in 1995 for an annuity to be paid until his death.

The house was purchased from the church by the South Middlesex Opportunity Council Housing Corp. in 2010 for \$200,000.

Rev. Zadig said, "My congregation was strongly for this sale. This was a derelict house. Now it is beautiful and serves an important purpose."

Inside the two-story house are 16 bright and airy bedrooms, including one for the resident manager and 15 for previously homeless individuals. Each of the 16 beds is covered by a handmade quilt donated by parishioners of Grace Church.

There are four bathrooms and a shared dining room and kitchen, laundry facilities, and ample parking behind the building, which has sprinklers and fire alarms.

Rev. Zadig said, "My hope is that the parish may be helpful for the people here. Think how many lives might be touched."

He said a few naysayers had concerns for the children in Grace Preschool next door, but he has faith that the SMOC residents will provide no problems.

"We couldn't feel more secure. We will know who is here and who is watching them. Do you know who is living next door to you? I believe everyone deserves a second chance — and a third chance."

Charles Gagnon, chief operating officer of SMOC, said the building was completely gutted and rebuilt during the \$800,000, two-year renovation.

James T. Cuddy, executive director of SMOC, said the pillars that decorate the front exterior, which is covered with clean white siding, and the long, curving stairway inside were among the historic

architectural details preserved.

He said SMOC oversees 1,700 housing units on 151 properties across the state, and has "a long history of faith-based partnerships. We need housing for the disadvantaged and the disabled. There will be no local preference, but obviously if someone who grew up here wants to come back, we would try to make that happen. We look forward to being a wonderful neighbor in Oxford."

He said that 10 years ago, SMOC made a commitment to the PIP shelter in Worcester, that "if they became part of SMOC, we would create housing. We opened a new shelter and triage center in Worcester. This housing project is the 20th in Worcester County. This is a marathon rather than a sprint. We met the challenges."

State Sen. Richard T. Moore, D-Uxbridge, said, "This is a great addition to the region providing housing options for those in transition. I know SMOC has a wonderful track record working with people. This supportive housing opportunity is a valuable public-private partnership that will provide shelter and care to those who need it most."

Mr. Cuddy said SMOC relies on its financial partners to get the job done and thanked the church, Southbridge Savings Bank, Federal Home Loan of Boston, the state Legislature, the Community Economic Development Assistance Corp., and the state Department of Housing and Community Development and its Housing Preservation and Stabilization Trust Fund.

Aaron Gornstein, department undersecretary, said the Oxford house "is a model of what we are providing — comprehensive services that foster self-sufficiency in the most cost-effective manner.

This is the best way to address the issue of homelessness involving state dollars in permanent, affordable housing."

He said Gov. Deval L. Patrick had pledged to open 1,000 units of permanent, supportive housing for low-income individuals and families in three years. "We met that goal in two years, including this project."

Robert Herzog, executive director of CEDAC, said that his corporation, which works with nonprofit developers, has a long history with SMOC, and "the projects are getting better and better."

Prior to the ribbon-cutting that officially opened the new housing project, the Reverend Robert S. Bachelder, a member of the SMOC Board of Directors and an Oxford resident, had the final word to close the ceremonies. He said SMOC was carrying on a long tradition in Oxford that began with Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross, who had a "fierce commitment to those who suffer," firmly believed in the "value and dignity of every person" and "a hand up, not a hand-out. I feel certain Clara Barton would have been glad to place her seal of approval on SMOC in Oxford."