

Larry's Place: A respite for homeless veterans

By Dan McDonald/Daily News staff

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FRAMINGHAM — Still weeks before its first tenants move in, there's already a lot of history packed into the three floors and 19 bedrooms of Larry's Place, a downtown veterans shelter.

It's a tribute to Larry Mace - a Vietnam veteran who struggled through decades of alcohol problems until getting sober in 1999. Those who remember Mace, who died in 2007, as an avid camper and kind soul were brought to tears during the shelter's open house yesterday.

To create Larry's Place, South Middlesex Opportunity Council waded through the town's permitting process for at least a year and spent \$1.5 million to buy and renovate the building.

The large house across from MetroWest Medical Center on Lincoln Street, also became a focal point in the divisive federal lawsuit that has pitted SMOC against elected town officials.

SMOC management envisions Larry's Place as a hub of services to help military veterans with substance abuse, mental health counseling and job skills.

Al Salerno looks at Larry's Place as a chance at redemption.

Salerno, a Lowell native, served as an Army mechanic in the late 1970s.

He last had a drink on Sept. 8 - his 51st birthday - when he was arrested for trespassing in Ashland. He was working the overnight shift at Stop & Shop at the time and has since enrolled in the Turning Point program, a SMOC-affiliated 18-bed emergency shelter for single adult men.

Norwood native David Patten also hopes to call Larry's Place home. The 39-year-old served in the infantry from 2000 to 2002 in Kosovo.

He still recalls the Black Hawk helicopters - "a real fun ride," - and the World War I-era land mines that dot the Balkan landscape.

He was part of a quick response team.

"The Albanian Muslims against the Serbian nationalists, it got pretty hairy. But it's nothing compared to Iraq or Afghanistan," Patten said.

He's been in town four months, after a tree fell on his trailer in Milton, N.H., and he had nowhere to go.

Now he's part of the Turning Point program.

Patten suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, which gives him memory and concentration problems.

His drug of choice used to be marijuana. He says hasn't had any drugs or alcohol for 41 days.

House manager James Bushard, an Army veteran of the early 1970s, articulated the need for the veteran services.

Veterans make up 23 percent of the homeless population, he says, and, on any given night, 131,000 American veterans are homeless.

Bushard knows what it's like.

He recalled staying on Court Street in Boston, which he described as a homeless "warehouse with 150 guys per floor." He was admitted to a veterans hospital earlier this decade with mental problems.

He used to drink in binges. "They might last six months, they might last 10 days," he said.

But with the exception of one three-week stint in 2004, Bushard has been sober for more than two decades.

SMOC has yet to get an occupancy permit and awaits final sign-offs from town departments. SMOC hopes to have people move within the next month.

The Veterans Day open house culminated with a blessing and numerous people reflecting on the importance of the facility. The rounds of applause came early and often.

There was no talk of the legal case yesterday.

Selectmen Chairwoman Ginger Esty - who is a named defendant in SMOC's case against the town - spoke of the need for such a service and its rightful place in the "fabric of Framingham."

She stood next to SMOC Executive Director Jim Cuddy as she spoke, and the two shook hands afterward.

Larry's Place was a component in SMOC's original complaint.

In October 2007, SMOC filed suit alleging elected town officials tried to block expansion of its programs throughout Framingham.

The stalled permitting of Larry's Place was one of the examples SMOC offered as evidence of Framingham's violation of federal law.

On July 11, 2007, SMOC submitted a building permit application for 90 Lincoln St. to the Building Commissioner's office. SMOC alleges on Sept. 18, 2007, under pressure from members of town government, including selectmen, the town denied SMOC's building permit for 90 Lincoln St.

SMOC eventually got its building permit in July 2008, after accusing the town of a "strikingly misguided attack on homeless disabled veterans," that "only further demonstrates the extreme lengths to which defendants have been and are willing to go to deprive helpless disabled individuals of the social services they desperately need, and, ultimately to drive out what they view as an undesirable segment of the population and any organization that might be willing to help it out of Framingham."

SMOC critics say the case is a threat to home rule, dissuades civic participation in government and violates freedom of speech rights.

SMOC counters by saying the town has discriminated against the disabled. In doing so, Framingham has broken federal laws, says SMOC.

SMOC seeks to put the town into receivership and individually names elected officials of Town Meeting, the Planning Board and selectmen in the case.

The town has appropriated at least \$750,000 for its legal defense.

The function of Larry's Place, however, should supersede any animosity in town over the case, says Bushard.

"The politics of it? I don't really know. A place like this sometimes can get caught in the cross fire. But I can tell you there is most definitely a need for it," he said.

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