

Group rebuilds house, lives

Non-profit program pairs renovation skills, education

By GEORGIA PARST
 of the Journal Sentinel staff

The once-dilapidated drug house at N. 25th St. and Kilbourn Ave. was such a scourge that state Attorney General James Doyle closed it down as a nuisance.

Today, it's ringed with harvest pumpkins and plantings. The building is freshly painted bright red, and the bricks of its facade are straight and tuck-pointed. The small, two-bedroom apartments are completely refurbished, and security is enhanced by a fence and outdoor lights.

More than just the building has been rehabilitated and restored.

The residents who live in the 10-unit apartment building have worked their way into what they hope will be a new beginning. They are the ones who have painted, plastered, hammered, sawed and sweat over the rehabilitation project. In late August, they moved into their new home.

Called the Corps House, the project and its residents are part of the Milwaukee Community Service Corps, a private, non-profit program that works with people ages 18 to 23 who may have dropped out of school or were headed on the wrong path.

Corps members get the chance to learn home renovation skills and landscaping. While they spend 80% of their time working on community service projects, 20% is used to obtain a high school equivalency diploma or driver's licenses, all steps to advance themselves into more education, apprenticeships or better paying jobs.

"A lot of corps members, about one out of three, run into the homeless issue," said Chris Litzow, director of the Milwaukee Community Service Corps. "We wanted this to be for corps members, built by corps members."

The project dates back to 1995, when Marquette University's Campus Circle acquired the apartment complex after it was closed by Doyle under a drug abatement law, said Tony Perez, the head of the city's Housing Authority and former corps director.

Campus Circle didn't know what to do with the building, so it turned it over to the corps as a training project, he said.

When Litzow joined the corps two and half years ago, he found funding to rehabilitate the building that included income tax credits through the state and Bank One Community Development Corp.

But smaller contributions have been made as well, Litzow said.

The late Sandra Janssen, an attorney who worked closely with the corps, contributed money. The Hyatt hotel donated beds, chairs and tables for the residents, Litzow said.

For some residents, such as Derek Bennett, 23, the corps and the new apartment have given him not just a home but hope for the future.

"I was practically on the street," he said. "I had no funds, no job, and I was going from house to house with no real place to stay," he said. "The corps has done a lot for me."

As a youth, he hung with the wrong crowd. For a time, he faced the prospect of life in prison on a murder charge. Instead, he was convicted on a lesser charge and served three years in prison.

"Once I got out of prison, I felt obliged to turn my life around."

Nine months ago, Bennett was accepted into the corps. Since then, he's received his high school equivalency degree and a certificate in landscaping. He's pursuing a certificate in carpentry and hopes to start his own business someday.

"Things are going well," he said. "I have friends who I work with and who are around here. We have gatherings and barbecues and talk about our problems. You learn to get along with yourself, not just others. They teach you to work well with others."

Bennett is one of three caretakers in the building. They not only rake leaves and keep the property neat and orderly, but also file weekly activity reports on what's going on in the neighborhood and the premises.

"Because this is one of the most difficult neighborhoods in Milwaukee — an area with a high rate of prostitution, drugs and crime — we want to make sure our people aren't participating," Litzow said.

Rents for the apartments run \$420 a month, although there's a subsidy that brings that down to \$275, plus utilities.

Those who are in the corps already know they are subject to drug testing and have to meet certain job attendance requirements and motivation levels. About 40% of members have some kind of probation, parole or corrections issues, Litzow said.

"We're not a correction facility," Litzow said. "You need to want to make a change in your life to be here. If you want to do that, we will work with you to make that a reality. It's a chance to stabilize and move forward."

The corps is funded for about 40 people who stay in the program for about a year.

Like the corps itself, the housing isn't meant as a permanent place but as a stepping stone to better housing and, maybe, home ownership, Litzow said.

A grand opening of the apartment building was held last week. Those who had contributed in one way or another were given small busts of President

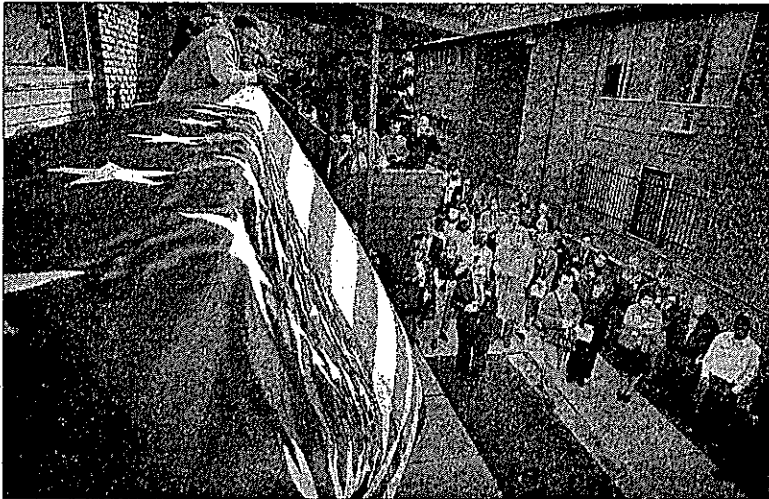
Franklin Roosevelt, who created the Civilian Conservation Corps, with a Roosevelt quotation that the corps has adopted as its own.

"I propose to create a Corps to be used in simple work," Roosevelt wrote, "...that this type of work is of definite, practical value, not only through the prevention of great financial loss, but also as a means of creating future national wealth."

Litzow believes that's what Milwaukee's Community Service Corps is trying to do.



Linska Harris sits with her son, Tyler Harris, 5, in the newly renovated Corps House in the 2500 block of W. Kilbourn Ave. Walking in the door is Troy Ferguson, holding Anthony Harris, 1, Linska's youngest son.



The Milwaukee Community Service Corps renovated the house, which was closed down in 1995 under a drug abatement law. Ten families moved into the building in August. The dedication ceremony was Wednesday.

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Keeping the faith



PHOTO BY CAIHAZE DOYLE

Oscar Aguilre (left) and Scott Goines, part of the Milwaukee Community Services Corps, work on a gathering hall for the United Memorial Baptist Church on 76th Street in Wauwatosa. The MCSC helps primarily low-income, ethnically and racially diverse 18- to 23-year-olds improve their community while learning job skills.

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'Hard-Hatted Women' unite

All-female crews encouraged
in training program for
construction industry

BY BECCA MADER
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For more than a decade, the Milwaukee Community Service Corps has provided training, education and opportunities to women and others who are underrepresented in the skilled trades.

While the nonprofit organization has helped many women pursue nontraditional career opportunities, the preparation still was intimidating in some respects as women were still the minority, director Chris Litzau said.

The nonprofit decided to tweak its program to feature an all-female crew, which organiz-

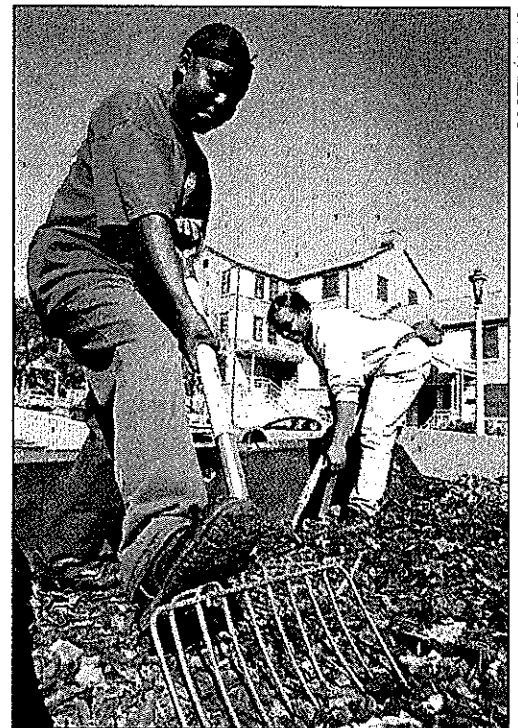
ers say creates more of a "safe harbor" for women developing their skills for nontraditional roles.

"We saw that females could perform just as well as males, if not better," Litzau said. "The question was, could we increase their self-esteem, self-confidence and performance by separating them into an all-female crew?"

Known as the Hard-Hatted Women's Initiative, the pre-apprenticeship training program geared toward women started in December 2003. It received a \$12,500 grant from the United Way of Greater Milwaukee and a \$10,000 grant from the Women's Fund of the Greater Milwaukee Foundation.

The program sets no income or job experience requirements, but the women need to be drug-free and willing to work, said Coey Sephus, the all-female crew's supervisor.

The program is evenly divided between class-



SCOTT PAULUS

Hard hatted women Cleopatra Jefferson, left, and Coey Sephus shovel mulch.

SEE **HARD-HATTED WOMEN**, PAGE A36