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Commentary

MARGARET BERNSTEIN



Generous readers bolster 2 projects

Dear readers: You rock. Since I started this column in February, you've been steadily answering my calls to action. On Thursday I had the honor of seeing two terrific local projects spring to life, aided by your generous responses.

In the afternoon, I stopped by a ribbon-cutting ceremony at a renovated house near Superior Avenue. Once a foreclosed property, it's now the Seasons of Hope drop-in center for addicted women.

"We couldn't ask for anything more than this. This is a place where women can feel really comfortable," said Cindy Chaytor, clinical director of the Hitchcock Center for Women treatment program, gesturing around the home that's painted in soothing cream and taupe tones. After 11 women's bodies were discovered on Imperial Avenue, Chaytor led the call for Cuyahoga County to establish a safe place for addicted women weary of the streets, a place free of bureaucratic restrictions where women like Anthony Sowell's victims wouldn't be judged or feel alienated.

In April, I wrote about the real estate woes that were keeping the Cuyahoga County Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services board from getting the effort up and going. Several readers offered to assist, including Third Federal Savings & Loan Chairman and Chief Executive Officer Marc Stefanski, who moved swiftly to donate a foreclosed Glenville home. "When I read the article in The Plain Dealer, I was moved," he said at Thursday's ceremony.

On the porch where Stefanski stood, women will soon be able to enter, change into scrubs and hand their dirty clothes to a worker to be washed. They'll be able to shower, to sit at the dining room table for a meal or spend time in a meditation room.

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BERNSTEIN

FROM B1

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They'll learn about drug and alcohol treatment options available to them. It'll be open 10 p.m. to 7 a.m.

Before cutting the rainbow-colored ribbon, Stefanski told the familiar story about the boy who saw that thousands of starfish had washed up on a beach and began throwing as many as he could back into the sea. When someone questioned the futility of it, he picked up another one, hurled it and said, "I made a difference to that one."

"If this helps one person, I think it's been successful," Stefanski said.

Program Manager Kim Fowler has already made sure of that. Since February, Fowler has been hitting the streets when the sun goes down, inviting women to Seasons of Hope's temporary location. More than 75 women have stopped by so far, and 10 have sought treatment.

On Thursday, Fowler poured out her thanks for Third Federal, city officials and the residents who allowed the center to be placed in their neighborhood. "This is a house of love," she told me. "We're going to love you until you learn to love yourself."

From there, I drove downtown to Pickwick & Frolic, where a line of more than 200 college-bound students and their mentors curved around through the restaurant and out the door onto East Fourth Street.

It was the well-attended kickoff for College Now of Greater Cleveland's new class of iMentors, and as a firm believer in the power of mentoring, I have to say it felt great to see 100 mentor-mentee pairs all chatting loudly and getting acquainted.

This is a program I raved about in June. I consider it brilliantly excuse-proof. The iMentor relationship is developed mainly through exchanged emails, so there's no big time commitment. Thursday's kickoff was one of the rare in-person events that mentors are asked to attend annually.

The aim is to boost more of the at-risk students receiving College Now's scholarships over the goal line of college graduation by giving them extra advice and support. Most of the youths in the room shared a common trait — their parents did not attend college, including Thanh Truong, a Vietnamese immigrant who graduated this summer from John Marshall High School. He's headed to Cleveland State University to major in mechanical engineering.

His new mentor, 31-year-old accountant Christopher Maeder, is one of dozens of Plain Dealer readers who signed up after reading my column.

Maeder, who works in the University Hospitals finance department, said he used to coach rowing at his alma mater, John Carroll University, and he missed mentoring college-age young people. "This was a good opportunity to get back in touch with that."

By the end of the evening, Maeder was handing out the brotherly advice, and Truong was soaking it up. "Get involved, don't isolate yourself. Don't be there just for classes," Maeder said after realizing that Truong will be a commuter student just as he was. "I tried to find a way to be involved in campus activities just to meet people. I think that's important."

I repeat: My readers rock. In fact, College Now got such a deluge of responses from you all that the organization has had to ask more than 150 eager volunteers to please wait until next year.

One of them is Jennifer Bachouros, a Westlake financial planner who's gone through an interview, orientation and a background check. She still has a sunny attitude even though she's been wait-listed. "I'm happy to help when they need me," she told me via email.

Cleveland, thanks for the enthusiasm. You've helped a lot of starfish lately.

To reach Margaret Bernstein:
mbernstein@plained.com,
216-999-4876

Previous columns online:
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