

A new home for hope

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THE GEEK SQUAD, the team of computer experts affiliated with the electronics store Best Buy, has been dropping by the computer lab at 550 Dudley St. in Roxbury, providing training to child-care providers so they can run their businesses more efficiently. It's part of the buzz in the new brick building constructed by the organization Project Hope.

The nonprofit opened its doors to homeless women 25 years ago in a sturdy but aging building on nearby Magnolia Street, where its family shelter, food pantry, and children's center will remain. Lined with windows, the new headquarters at 550 Dudley is full of doors to life-changing opportunities.

"This community is important, and this building says it," explains Elizabeth Zarrella, the director of development.

To fulfill the potential of its new home, Project Hope has to scatter the seeds of success across the neighborhood, helping adults advance and showing children that their neighborhoods offer rich resources.

The work has started. On the first floor, there's the community computer lab that plays host to the Geek Squad and the public. There's more room to do more work with neighbors, such as Best Buy and other businesses in the South Bay shopping center.

On the second floor are education programs. Third floor: housing and career development programs. Fourth floor: offices and striking treetop views of the neighborhood and of downtown Boston's skyscrapers, a window-framed reminder that prosperity should be a web connecting all the city's neighborhoods.

The building makes a needed contribution by filling what was a vacant lot with an environmentally friendly structure made of recycled materials and fitted with efficient water and heating systems. While other vacant lots remain, those sad holes in the urban fabric are also attracting development. Down the street at 650 and 655 Dudley, the Salvation Army will build a community center, using an \$85 million gift from the estate of Joan Kroc, the widow of the founder of McDonald's.

The next step is to experiment and answer key questions such as how long it takes for families to escape poverty and what helps them do so. Project Hope should flex its muscles even farther beyond the scope of government anti-poverty programs, so that it can develop the innovations that will eventually become commonplace and common sense.

A recent New York Times story looked at boxer Oscar de la Hoya and other famous athletes who invest in inner-city communities, seeing both a business opportunity and a way to do good. Vital community organizations complement this work, encouraging people and communities to make unprecedented investments in themselves. ■

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