

Dorchester Reporter

“The News and Values Around the Neighborhood”

New Beacon of Hope Rises on Dudley

October 5, 2006

By *Elizabeth Fabiani*
Special to the Reporter

One year of building, six years of fundraising, and \$5.4 million dollars later, Project Hope, a multi-service agency that aims to prevent homelessness throughout Boston, opened the doors to its brand new headquarters on Dudley Street in August 2006.

The building, constructed with recycled materials and designed to be "earth-friendly" through its use of low-energy elevators and natural light, is fully equipped with two state-of-the-art computer centers, a spacious community room with a projection screen, a number of sizeable classrooms and administrative offices with outstanding views of Boston's skyline. The new building stands as a symbol of hope for all clients that step through the glass doors and into the polished, professional lobby of Project Hope's headquarters.

"After finding ourselves in three different locations in the neighborhood, we wanted to bring everything together under one roof so that programs could be more integrated and responsive to families," said Sister Margaret Leonard, executive director of Project Hope and the humble, driven force behind the planning and fundraising of the new headquarters.

"The City of Boston, the [the Department of Neighborhood Development], [Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative], the businesses on Dudley Street, and our neighbors, all rallied in support of our efforts," said Sister Margaret. "Before we knew it the building was in process, like the phoenix rising up from the debris and ashes once there."

Fundraising lasted for six years before groundbreaking began. Individual donors as well as large corporations such as the Putnam Foundation, Lynch Foundation, Amelia Peabody Foundation, and the Boston Foundation donated in support of Project Hope's daunting task to raise \$5.7 million dollars. Due to extensive financial planning and resourceful methods, nearly all the money needed was raised; only \$300,000 remains.

The new building houses the center for adult education, workforce development, and housing services while the original building on Magnolia Street continues to house the family shelter, child care center and food pantry.

"It was hard to find us on Magnolia Street," said Elizabeth Zarrella, director of development and external affairs at Project Hope. The prominent visibility and strong presence of the new headquarters communicates to its neighbors that Project Hope is invested in the surrounding community and believes in its success.

"Our neighbors have been supportive from day one of the planning process," added Sister Margaret. "They came to meetings, wrote letters of support, kept the building safe, and so much more."

The new building caters to Project Hope's original clientele, a diverse mix of Latinos, Haitians, African Americans and Cape Verdeans, and will now be able to expand its numbers because of the added classroom space that the new center provides.

"Our aim is homelessness prevention," said Zarrella. "But if there's something that someone needs that we have - great - sign them up."

Although the organization permits only women to enroll in Project Hope's GED program and to live in the shelter with their children, support is provided to both women and men in all other Project Hope programs.

The largest program, the Homeless Prevention program, provides counseling, emergency rent, landlord negotiation, and housing search assistance to at-risk families while the Partners in Career and Workforce Development (PCWD) program provides career guidance as well as guaranteed job placement after a five week training program. "The PCWD program is a phenomenal model," said an enthusiastic Zarrella. "The [clients] are meeting the staff and receiving lessons on how to write a resume, dress for an interview, and search for a suitable job. It's their success that we're seeing; we're just lucky to have been a piece of that."

Project Hope has produced a number of success stories since the Little Sisters of the Assumption first opened their convent doors in 1981 in an effort to address the growing population of homeless families in the Dudley Street neighborhood.

The constant support provided by Project Hope enabled one woman to pursue her dream as a pharmacist after becoming homeless in 2000. The organization has also sent women to colleges such as Tufts, Bunker Hill and a possible acceptance to Boston College Law School through its One Family Scholars Program funded by the Paul & Phyllis Fireman Charitable Foundation.

Project Hope plans to continue their expansion by, "developing new partnerships with businesses and helping a larger number of families gain access to education and jobs that have benefits and a living wage," said Sister Margaret.

The Project Hope building also represents the vanguard of a renewed period of redevelopment on Dudley Street. Next year Dorchester Bay Economic Development Corporation is slated to develop new housing on the Dudley strip and construction on a huge new Salvation Army community center is expected to begin.

"It's absolutely vital because we don't work with teens," said Zarella of the Salvation Army center. "It's also a great investment in the community; it really says something."

The official opening of the Project Hope headquarters will take place on October 11, 2006. Not only will it celebrate the opening of a brand new building, it will also mark the 25th anniversary of Project Hope. There will be a formal ribbon cutting by Mayor Thomas Menino as well as Latin dance, a jazz singer, food, toasting, and an open walkthrough of the center. There is no cover fee or required donation and Project Hope extends an invitation to all who wish to come.