

Renovation brings together programs that rebuild lives



Randolf Williams, standing, watches Bill G. as he finishes a tricky cut in a baseboard. Bill is helping Randolph learn an unfamiliar phase of carpentry.



Peter Reis, supervisor, finishes a wall that divides two newly created rooms.

Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

Sisters hire parolees for construction job

By Teresa A. Parsons

Construction work is more than a job to three of the five men renovating a house at 72 Dorvid Road, West Irondequoit. It's a chance to rebuild their lives by learning new skills.

The women who live in the house are striving toward a similar goal in their lives.

Somehow, it seems fitting that the two groups should help each other.

At least that is the view taken by those particular men and women, who are, respectively, parolees in the Cephias Attica program and residents of Spirit House, a therapeutic community for women religious.

Last month, the Spirit House community moved from 428 Mount Vernon Avenue, where it was established in 1981, to Dorvid Road. The new house, which the community purchased in September, needed renovation to convert seven large second-floor bedrooms into 10 smaller rooms.

A member of the community's board suggested that Sister Mollie Brown, RSM, the director of Spirit House, ask for an estimate from the Cephias Attica construction crew.

Her decision to hire the crew was based

on more than the low bid they submitted for the job.

"We on the staff felt strongly that since we're really into helping people pull things together in their lives, and that's pretty much what they do, why not help each other?" Sister Brown said.

Spirit House is one of only a half-dozen or so residential programs in the country that offer women religious a combination of preventive mental-health care and counseling, apostolic work, and the support of an established religious community. In addition to three live-in staff members, Spirit House can accommodate as many as a dozen women, who stay for an average of 10 months.

The sisters come to Spirit House from all over the country, for a number of reasons. Some residents are struggling to resolve questions about their vocation or ministry, while others suffer chronic depression or anger. Still others are recovering after treatment for alcohol or drug abuse.

Those are difficulties that men who are trying to put prison backgrounds behind them can well understand.

One of the renovators on the construction crew is a former juvenile delinquent who has dabbled in drug and alcohol abuse. Another is a Vietnam veteran who has served time in prison for murdering someone who criticized the U.S. Marine Corps.

While they are still in prison, these men participated in a counseling program offered by Cephias Attica, a non-denominational program supported primarily by grants, donations and a contract with the state parole board.

Altogether, Cephias' counselors work with more than 170 inmates in five local correctional facilities, including those at Attica, Groveland and Wyoming.

Once they are released from prison, par-

ticipants in the counseling program can apply to live at Cephias Attica's Arnett Boulevard housing facility, which accommodates a maximum of 16 men.

In exchange for meals, housing and a small stipend, the men work in one of three job-training programs. Besides the construction crew, Cephias Attica operates a bakery and a catering service, both of which employ parolees.

As the men learn new job skills and sharpen some of the ones they previously had, counselors help them search for regular full-time employment.

If Sister Brown's experience at Spirit House is any indication, the skills of the men on Cephias' construction crew rank as eminently marketable.

"It's clear that restoration is really their forte," she said. "Judging by the care and precision with which they're working, when these men finish, this house will not look divided."

Meanwhile, more than physical labor has been accomplished during the past three weeks at Spirit House. Last week, one of the sisters baked breakfast rolls to share with the crew members. The following day, the crew brought doughnuts for everyone. They chat over coffee in the morning.

"It's like having your family working there — that's the joy of it," said Sister Brown. "They're learning about us, and we're learning about them. It's been a really, really fine thing."



Bill G., Randolph Williams, Simon Smith and Peter Reis take a few minutes for a cup of coffee and a couple of jokes.

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