

Eastern N.O. complex encourages health

Community center offers education, activities

Thursday, February 04, 2010

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For almost two years after Hurricane Katrina, the site of the Walnut Square apartments in eastern New Orleans sat desolate and dark. Those days, however, are a thing of the past.

With the units occupied again, the mixed-income complex recently celebrated the opening of its new community center, a spot where residents will be able to participate in fitness classes and health-conscious arts and educational programs.

"There's ways to incorporate health and wellness into everything we do," said Christopher Bentivegna, assistant national director of resident services for the NHP Foundation, the nonprofit that owns the property.

Culinary activities for children will introduce them to food from other cultures. Recently, Bentivegna's "virtual vacations" program let the children experience Japan, when they learned how to make sushi with brown rice.

"We always put a healthy slant on it," Bentivegna said.

According to a fact sheet compiled by the Tulane Prevention Research Center, there is a need in New Orleans for greater accessibility to programs with a healthy angle. The PRC found more than 30 percent of elementary schools in the city - as well as 70 percent of middle and junior high schools and just less than 90 percent of high schools - have a vending machine, school store, canteen or snack bar where students can buy snack food.

There is no vending machine at Walnut Square.

"In our after-school program ... we're teaching kids how to prepare their own healthy snacks and healthy food that they can make at home," said Kenneth White, director of resident services for the NHP Foundation.

But it's not only the complex's youth who will be taking away new skills from the community center. A slate of programs for adults are offered as well.

Only about one in five adults in New Orleans consume five or more servings of fruits and vegetables per day, according to the PRC fact sheet. Forty percent drink soft drinks daily, and 31 percent eat snack foods daily. In 2007, fewer than 40 percent of adults in Louisiana met the recommended levels of physical activity.

A fitness room at the community center will provide free ballroom dancing and cardio classes administered by program facilitators.

"It's a sign of respect," White said. "Here we have a nice place to live and work and we want to keep it that way."

City Council President Arnie Fielkow said he sees the new mixed-income complex and its community center as a symbol of progress.

"I am awed and inspired by some incredible people that have brought life back to a community," Fielkow said. "It's so much more than just the bricks and mortar."

Ralph F. Boyd, Jr., CEO of the Freddie Mac Foundation, the charitable organization that invested \$900,000 in the resident services division of the NHP Foundation, lauded the physical design of the property all the way down "to the last blade of grass."

"The culture of community that's present here is as ... encouraging as the physical facilities," Boyd said.

When work began on the community center, Bentivegna imagined four distinct rooms, each of which would house different programs. Michael Dixon, a local artist, adapted Bentivegna's vision and made it a reality.

The green room, modeled after a southern veranda, features paintings of willow trees. The teen room has a global motif - clocks show the time in different cities around the planet. On one wall, Dixon painted a mural of Big Ben, the Eiffel Tower and other world landmarks. The da Vinci room gives children supervised access to computers among murals of legendary drawings from Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks. Elementary school-age children can read books in a gingerbread nook in the fairy tale room, which features a giant beanstalk climbing up a wall that also acts as a book shelf.

For all the celebration around the opening of the the community center, it was also a celebration of a two-year, \$40 million project to rebuild the entire complex. The original property was severely damaged by flooding after Hurricane Katrina. It was razed in 2006.

John Ferguson, a tenant who lived in Walnut Square before Katrina, said he is happy to return home. After four years away, he moved back in last year.

When the federal government issued warnings about health hazards in FEMA's temporary housing, Ferguson left his trailer in Slidell and returned to eastern New Orleans. The Red Cross helped put Ferguson and his grandson into an apartment that overlooked the abandoned complex where he once mingled with neighbors at outdoor barbeques and crawfish boils.

"I was able to watch the old facility being torn down and watch the new facility being built right in front of my eyes," Ferguson said. "I'm grateful for the quiet heroes that took the time to invest and build back the community."

Ferguson, who raised two teenage boys, knows the importance of having supervised, after-school programs.

"It gives the kids something to do," he said. "It keeps them out of trouble. In the summertime, it keeps them out of the streets. The more activity that is positive for kids, the less negative activity they get into."