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Renovation gives new life to Dot boys' home

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Students from Northeastern University paint as part of the renovations to Putnam Place on Glendale Street in Dorchester. The program houses young males between the ages of 15 and 22 who have either "aged out" of the Massachusetts foster care system or just grown exhausted of being shuttled back and forth from home to home as part of it. (Tony Irving photo)

Allison Kelso

The typical quiet of Glendale Street in Dorchester was replaced last Saturday with a flurry of activity.

As the rain poured down outside, workers inside Putnam Place, located at 78 Glendale Street, were busy sanding the walls. A squadron of Northeastern University students stood at the ready, armed with paint brushes in the building's foyer, while others worked in the building's dilapidated basement.

The renovation work was aimed at revitalizing Putnam Place, which houses young males between the ages of 15 and 22 who have either "aged out" of the state's foster care system — meaning they've reached the age where the system will no longer cover the costs of caring for them — or who have just grown exhausted of it. Run by local nonprofit Cambridge Family and Children's Services (CFCS), the home attempts to teach residents life skills and ease the transition into independent living.

With limited funds to keep the place running, the basement had fallen into disrepair. Sewage and flooding had damaged the floor and a slew of makeshift workspaces dotted the area. At least, that's what the rooms had looked like before Tsoi/Kobus & Associates, a Cambridge-based architectural design firm, got involved.

The refurbishing of Putnam Place — a pro bono project that was one year and more than \$150,000 in the making — creates a safe and inviting space for the six boys who inhabit it, according to the firm.



Volunteers on the pro bono "Community Build" project, helmed by Cambridge-based architectural design firm Tsoi/Kobus & Associates, paint a wall at 78 Glendale Street in Dorchester, the home of Putnam Place. (Tony Irving photo)

"We felt we could add a lot of value," said Katy Tassmer, TK&A's chief marketing officer. "We wanted to make them feel like it's more of a home."

TK&A, Commodore Builders of Newton and dozens of vendors donated supplies to transform the basement. A woodworking station opens up to the house's backyard, while a recording studio and study lounge stand on either side of a laundry space. Murals and bright colors adorn the walls.

The art and design all centers on the T, the theme chosen by Putnam's residents. When workshops were held with the youth to discuss how the space should look, the public transit system eventually emerged as the visual choice, as it serves as a connection to their Cambridge roots.

Signs for a mock Putnam Place T stop, a shelving structure shaped like the front of a train car, and brightly colored rooms of orange, blue and red all convey the theme.

"They really came up with the concept on their own," said Rick Kobus, one of the principals of the architectural design firm that helmed the project.

While the renovated basement does include unique flourishes like the woodworking and studio setups, Putnam Place's focus remains basic — providing the young inhabitants with positive role models and teaching them staple skills for independent living that some people may take for granted. Staff members present around the clock teach residents how to handle necessary tasks like ironing clothes, planning meals and opening a bank account.

"We actually march them to the bank," said CFCS Executive Director Maria Mossaides.

Mossaides, who has run the nonprofit for the past year, stressed that young men, particularly in this high-risk age group, need the connection and support that a home like Putnam Place can provide.

"For most of them, they leave [foster care] at 18 and they're on the street," she said. "These are the Commonwealth's children ... they don't stop being our kids because they reach the age of 18."

Those who do age out tend to face serious obstacles, and the outcomes can be grim.

A 2007 fact sheet published by the National Foster Care Coalition noted that 46 percent of young people who age out do not earn a high school diploma, and that 98 percent do not earn a bachelor's degree. More than half are unemployed, 30 percent do not have health insurance and one-fourth have been homeless at some point.

The unique age group the home services represents an often ignored population. In fact, Mossaides said, Putnam Place and its counterpart, the Teens Learning Choices Girls Program in Malden, Mass., which houses female foster youths, are the only independent living homes in the Greater Boston area.

Jeffrey Prophete has worked at Putnam Place as a case manager for nearly a year. With a bachelor's degree in criminal justice from Northeastern and experience as a community field coordinator in the Boston Public Schools, Prophete is no stranger to how difficult it can be for students to overcome the disruptions that sometimes arise in the foster care system.

"They move from program to program or home to home," Prophete said. "They're not able to ground themselves."

He stressed that the system lacks opportunities to teach life skills or utilize socialization techniques on many foster youth.

"There's a big gap that all these kids fall through," Prophete said. "What are you doing about it?"

That question spurred Rick Kobus to action. A year ago, his architectural design firm, Tsoi/Kobus & Associates, was celebrating its 25th anniversary, and were looking to mark the event with a pro bono building project.

"I felt like we ought to do something for the community that we've called home for so long," Kobus said.

A reference from the United Way led them to Putnam Place. After viewing the home's dank basement, Kobus and his associates decided to retool the space. They called Commodore Builders, whom they had worked with before, and began planning the project, which they named "Community Build."

The resultant changes were exciting to Sean Wilson, 18, who has lived at Putnam Place for almost a year.

In his spare time, Wilson enjoys woodworking and plans to make use of the basement's new studio — not to mention the big-screen television waiting in the living room.

"I can't wait 'till it's finished," he said, before dashing off to help paint the walls.

As a part of the residents' life skills development, they have to take turns cooking dinner for the group. But what many consider a necessary evil, Wilson saw as place to experiment and create.

"I usually make burgers or steaks; whatever I see interesting when I work at Stop & Shop," Wilson said. "I made two cakes here once, but they came out like Jell-o."

Wilson seems undeterred by the occasional dessert flop, and said he plans to study culinary arts at Bunker Hill Community College once he completes the college's general education requirements.

Kobus said the Putnam Place project, which took longer than expected and cost more than calculated, hit a rough patch last year as the economy plunged downward. Vendors stressed by finances had to renege on promised supplies, and the costs of the pro bono project began to mount.

"But you know, we never hesitated," Kobus said. "You have a group of boys here who have not had an easy life ... we'd like to give them the kind of support they deserve."

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