

# Senior Living at Prouty hosts Open House

SPENCER — Nearly 300 people hailing from Spencer, other Central Massachusetts communities and beyond came to Senior Living at Prouty for an Open House held Friday, May 14. The well-attended event, sponsored by Newton-based MHPI, Inc., included tours of the converted school, as well as remarks from a number of special guests.

Among the speakers addressing the standing room only crowd were MHPI President Sheldon Bycoff, Congressman Richard E. Neal (D-Springfield) and newly appointed Housing and Urban Development Regional Director Richard A. Walega. Also taking to the stage were state Sen. Stephen Brewer (D-Barre), Department of Housing and Community Development Director of Housing Programs Andrew Nelson and Donald Berthiaume Jr., chairman of the Spencer Board of Selectmen.

Most recently known as David Prouty Intermediate School, this historic building has been reborn as a very low-income senior housing community. Many of its new residents are either graduates or the parents of graduates from this school or the predecessor high school.

The original building, which dates back to the 1880s, has found a new life after a few years without a purpose. Today it has 35 units of affordable housing for very low income seniors (62 and older) who meet both age and financial criteria. The building also includes a resident manager and a part-time service coordinator who will offer many of the supportive services. The 50,000-square-foot building features independent living apartments offering sweeping views of Spencer and the surrounding hills. Outside, reproductions of the original street lamps give the building's historically accurate facade an 1880s feel.

The project is funded through grants from the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Department of Housing and Community Development, the Community Economic Assistance Corporation and MassHousing. In addition, HUD provides project rental assistance to tenants so that they pay no more than 30 percent of their adjusted gross income, thus maintaining affordability. The HUD Section 202 Program awards funding to create affordable, supportive housing for low-income seniors that allow them to continue living independently.

The transformation of a school into housing for the elderly was not easy. As with many older buildings that had been closed for some time, the building had a leaking roof, water damage, buckling floors, outmoded plumbing and heating systems among many upgrading needs. Working with a plan designed by the architectural firm Studio One, Inc., the contractor, Barr Inc. had been through this process before and was required by both the owner and the Massachusetts Historic

Commission to preserve as much of the building's historic elements as possible.

"We have helped give life back to a number of older buildings throughout New England, so we were used to the kind of challenges Prouty offered up," said John Darigan, Barr's project manager. "It's a matter of preserving the character of the building while accommodating modern conveniences."

Residents began moving into their apartments in early March. Personal relationships with the building are quite common. In fact, Barr's superintendent in charge of the project graduated from the school in 1982. Some of the residents are the parents of students of who went there.

Senior Living at Prouty includes 35 units of affordable housing, six of which are studio and 29 are one bedroom. The project is developed for very low-income seniors and also includes an apartment for Prouty's resident manager. Along with housing, residents have access to on-site supportive services.

"Residential communities such Prouty enable older adults to age in place," Bycoff said. "MHPI strives to provide a living environment that will help tenants live as independently as possible. When the need arises, eligible tenants will be able to avail themselves to an array of services, including personal care assistance and homemaking. The on-site, part-time Service Coordinator will assist residents in linking up with agencies that help them meet such needs as medical services, meals, money management, shopping, grooming or medication monitoring. MHPI's vision is to offer the variety of services one might experience in a private assisted living facility, but generally not financially available to very low-income seniors."

As of 2004, more than 27,000 elderly individuals in Central Massachusetts were on waiting lists for low-income affordable housing. This number is sure to grow as the nation's elderly population continues to expand.

The school's history brings a special character to its residents and the community. Its place on the historic registry made it particularly important to the town, as did its location in Spencer's Downtown Historic District.

"There is a rich and storied history associated with that school," said Bycoff. "In fact, included in its history is a training ground for past militias. Truly, the building was built to withstand a varied history."

The building began as a high school in 1888. As a school, it had several incarnations — as a junior high from 1966-94, when Knox Trail Junior High School opened, and later as an intermediate school (Grades 5-8). In the 1930s, the school expanded with an addition. The town decided that the building became surplus property when Wire Village School opened in 2004. At that time the town created a Committee to Study the Adaptive Reuse of the David Prouty



David Dore photos

Janet Moran of North Brookfield, who taught at David Prouty Junior High School, proudly wore a 34-year-old shirt showing the place where she worked. She and other people who once taught there — some of who are now at Knox Trail Junior High School — took a tour May 14 of the building, now known as Senior Living at Prouty.

Intermediate School and recommended to the town a future use for the facility.

As part of the adaptive reuse competition, the town entertained a variety of proposed uses for the site, including utilizing it for condominiums and as a Boys and Girls Club. After a lengthy review the town accepted MHPI's proposal to develop the property as very low income housing for older adults. MHPI engaged Studio One Inc. in Springfield as architects and selected Barr, Inc. as general contractor.

To preserve the character of the building, Barr, at the direction of the owner and architect, worked to save as much of the interior of the 1888 building as possible. The building was historically significant, both because of its place on the Historic Register and in Spencer's historical district. That meant the facade also had to be accurately preserved.

"We had to restore everything to reflect historical elements," Darigan said. "The Massachusetts Historic and town Historical Commission were very involved. Everything was done thoughtfully to preserve the important historical aspects of the building while still providing full accessibility to the residents and the general public."

Among the things his team did to retain the historic character of the building were replace the windows

in the historic building and its addition with energy-efficient replicas of the original windows; replace the old slate roof, keeping the copper caps, gutters and downspouts; match the original mullions and transoms and strip down and reuse as much of the woodwork and wood planking for the floors.

Because the building was vacant for four years before recent renovation work, it presented some unique problems.

"The roof was breaking down which resulted in significant water damage," Darigan said. "Some of the wood floors actually buckled 14 inches in height. But we were determined to preserve the history and character of that building. That meant saving as much of that phenomenal wood flooring as possible."

The architectural plans called for giving the school's old gymnasium a new life.

"We subdivided the gym into two floors each with common areas and apartments. Some of those residents are actually living in the space where the boy's locker room was," Darigan said. "One of our biggest challenges was to salvage as much of the gym floor planking as possible. Those seniors lucky enough actually have that flooring in their apartments."

One of the most dramatic uses of the old space is the school's original auditorium and library. It's now the Community Room, complete with the original soaring exposed truss ceiling, rich wood flooring, bookshelves and stage. The stage has been fitted with a wheelchair lift to allow residents with a taste for the footlights to perform. There's also a small special-event dining room and warming kitchen.

While preserving the building's historic character, the members of the Barr Inc. and Studio One also had to be mindful of the building's new use life. Changes had to be made. The owner and its architect wanted to preserve the school's layout to the greatest extent possible,

but it had to adapt to its new "students." School hallways — which used to accommodate large crowds of children — now function as well-designed and decorated corridors for the apartments. In addition, the whole building needed to be handicapped accessible. While six of the apartments are currently completely handicapped accessible, all 35 units have been designed so as to be adapted for this purpose. Moreover, all common areas are fully accessible to all.

Within the building, residents find every convenience of today's living including wide hallways and rooms that easily accommodate a wheel chair or walker. Every unit has fully functional kitchens, individual climate controls, hookups for high-speed Internet and cable TV as well as emergency pull cords. Each of the three floors has its own color scheme to aid navigation.

Despite the challenges the project presented, Bycoff is very pleased with the project's outcome.

"The entire development team worked tirelessly to preserve and enhance a building with countless historic elements, many of which would be financially impossible to replicate today," he said. "The Barr team has been especially thoughtful and mindful in successfully executing the plans of the owner and architect to make the building functional and livable for older adults. We are so pleased with the outcome that we're hoping to submit the finished building to a number of organizations for recognition both as an adaptive reuse project and as a historic preservation undertaking. Barr's people have done everything possible to give this building and its residents the new lives they deserve."

Studio and one-bedroom apartment units are still available on a first-come, first-serve basis. To request an application, contact Occupancy Specialist Jane Karoway at (617) 431-4924 or by e-mail at jkaroway@mhpi.net.



MHPi, Inc. President Sheldon Bycoff, center, speaks to teachers who taught at the former David Prouty Junior High School during a tour May 14.



The outside of Senior Living at Prouty shows little of the amount of work that was done inside to create three dozen apartments for low-income senior citizens.



People congregate in the former David Prouty High School auditorium, now the community room of Senior Living at Prouty, on Friday, May 14 — the day MHPI, Inc., owners of the housing complex, held an open house.

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