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'Manna' giving agency new look Businesses chip in to make over facility serving disabled

By JEANNIE KEVER
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Johnny Hanson Chronicle

Staff member Meling Guerra applauds a resident at The Center's adult activity center. A donation by philanthropist Ron Nixon and his wife, Ginny, jump-started renovations at the high-rise for people with developmental disabilities.

The Center was looking a little shabby.

One section still had the original light fixtures and concrete ceiling from its days as a parking garage. Bare cement floors marked a lobby damaged by Hurricane Ike. Bricks were falling from some buildings, furniture in public spaces was old and worn, and everything was a little grimy.

Even the sign at the entrance on West Dallas Street was out of date, identifying the complex as The Center Serving Persons with Mental Retardation, with the last five words painted over to reflect its newly shortened name.

So it came as no surprise to Center executives when Ron Nixon, a local businessman and founder of the Mutt Foundation, toured the complex earlier this year and proclaimed it in need of help.

"We knew that," said executive director Eva Aguirre.

But faced with growing demand for services — caused in part by the fact that people with developmental disabilities now live longer — and declining government support, other needs always came first.

So Nixon, a founding principal at The Catalyst Group, launched a makeover involving more than a dozen local companies.

His foundation had sent The Center \$50,000 in December.

Fundraisers there hadn't asked for the money, and they weren't sure the donation was for real.

It was.

Nixon offered \$60,000 more after he and his wife, Ginny, toured The Center in January. He also raised an additional \$60,000 and called friends to help.

It was, said Debra Collins, executive director of The Center Foundation, "manna from heaven."

'A higher calling'

A \$1.3 million renovation is in progress, most of it covered by donated materials, labor and design work.

Collins said The Center has raised \$255,000 toward a \$300,000 goal — including Nixon's gift — to cover additional expenses.

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Companies involved in The Center's makeover include:

- Midway Companies
- A&E Products
- Acme Brick
- Brickfield Builders
- Garza McClane
- Gensler
- Gilbane
- Interface
- Inventure Design
- Kudela Weinheimer
- Marek Brothers
- Perennial Landscape
- Studio 68
- Tree Source
- Tribble & Stephens
- Upchurch Kimbrough

Residents have noticed the hubbub.

"It will make me feel special," said longtime resident Kelly Welden, 49. "The workshop needs repair bad."

Midway Companies, a real estate development and investment group, was one of the first to jump on board.

"There's a higher calling out there," said Shon Link, director of development for Midway. "We feel we're here to do greater things than develop buildings."

Link coordinated the project, calling in designers and landscape architects to determine what was needed and finding additional companies to help.

The first projects dealt with technical issues - repairing crumbling brick, cleaning and sealing buildings and walkways, landscaping a central courtyard and catching up on years of deferred maintenance. A new sign was installed at the entrance.

Now the fun part begins - covering worn linoleum with carpeting, installing new ceiling tiles and lighting fixtures, reconfiguring spaces to give the most medically fragile clients both privacy and natural lighting. Walls will be painted, furniture replaced, landscaping redone and an aging outdoor activity area refurbished.

The Center opened in 1966 to serve people with mental retardation, a condition characterized by low IQ and limited social coping skills.

Its services have expanded over the years and now include job training and work programs, day programs, respite care and two residential programs. About 130 people live in a high-rise dormitory in the complex, just west of downtown, while another 61 live on a working organic farm near Sealy.

In all, it serves about 750 people.

'A good idea'

The project jump-started by Nixon isn't the only revamp at The Center.

Aguirre said additional work covered by a \$500,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development includes new elevators, automatic doors, a renovated laundry room and a new roof.

Link said much of the work he is overseeing is related to the age of the buildings - most were constructed in the 1960s - and lingering damage from Hurricane Ike.

There weren't imminent safety issues, he said, "but the buildings were at the point where they couldn't keep water off people's heads."

The interior work will be about improving the quality of life.

"Right now, everything feels very institutional," he said. "Subconsciously, that can impact people's outlook."

Residents such as Ira Mohler, 54, approve of the changes.

"It is a good idea," he said. "Some of it does need it."

Employees will appreciate it, as well.

But Richard Rettig, who oversees admissions at The Center, said the renovation also should put the residents' families at ease.

"Parents are very sensitive about where they send people who are so fragile," he said.

jeannie.kever@chron.com



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