

Building community: Architect's vision drove project
February 21, 2010
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News & Record

GREENSBORO — Ride over the railroad tracks behind John's Curb Market on East Market, and right beyond the sign for Eastside Park, you can't miss it.

It's big, 4,500-square-foot big. It's the color of dried mud, all glass and concrete, with a slit in the metal roof to make room for a 32-inch oak.

Neighbors worried. They heard that recovering drug addicts or recently released convicts would be coming to live in this odd-looking house on their tough side of town.

Nope.

This house, nine years in the making, will become a home for five pregnant or parenting young women, ages 16 to 21, looking for a safe, nurturing place.

It's a first in Greensboro and a crucial move for Guilford County, where, according to state health statistics, at least two teens ages 15 to 19 have babies every day.

The name? My Sister Susan's House, a home built by UNCG and GTCC students.

Susan's House had its grand opening Monday, and as a crush of people came through the door, they met Robert Charest — the man behind the building, a stocky 45-year-old with a French accent and shoulder-length ponytail.

He talked to as many people as he could. But by the time he hit Arby's on Battleground for a quick dinner with his wife Amanda and their 4-year-old son, Liam, he was all talked out.

"How do you feel?" Amanda asked.

"Honestly, I don't know yet," he answered. "I need a while to let this all sink in."

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Three years.

Three years of sleepless nights.

Three years of missed vacations.

Three years of spending most every waking moment creating Susan's House — from cardboard models the size of a candy bar to a big building on York Street where he worked as designer, carpenter, teacher and cranky sage.

His mind never let up. He'd be home, watching TV or having dinner or lying in bed, and he'd say, "Oh, OK" to no one in particular and race to a pad to jot down a thought before he forgot it.

"When you figure out your problem, come on back, and I'll finish what I'm saying," Amanda would tell him.

She calls him Rob. Most everyone else calls him Robert, as in Ro-BEAR. His students at UNCG have more choice words for the Canadian-born Frenchman, the professor who taught them interior architecture in a project he calls Urban Studio.

They call him a slave driver. And that's one of the nicer descriptions.

He drove them hard at Susan's House. But he makes no apologies.

He'll tell you he's a typical Frenchman, slightly arrogant with no tolerance for goofing off. And with 150 students working on Susan's House since January 2009, he saw his share of goofing off.

His declarations were curt and emphatic, and his students repeated them, especially in front of Charest. And always, they imitated his French accent.

"Get to work!"

"What the hell?"

"Son of a (expletive), what are you doing?"

But they learned.

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They arrived with few skills. They left with the knowledge of how to frame a house, install metal roofs and build energy-efficient walls out of concrete and insulation.

And of course, how to play air guitar with any tool.

They learned they could lead and design and trust their instincts. And when they looked at their calloused hands, bruised knees and broken fingernails, they knew small details really do matter in big designs.

Lauren Goodrum, a UNCG senior, started work on Susan's House in January 2009, and on her first day, she stepped onto a frozen puddle and found herself hip-deep in icy water.

A great start.

When she went home to Archdale, she complained. But her mom, a church secretary, said: "You can do this."

Lauren found that out. After finishing the class, Lauren stayed on — first for a summer internship and then into the fall with a job that paid \$10 an hour.

She didn't stay for the money. She stayed because she wanted to see this big building done, and she knew what it was for.

So, on grand-opening Monday, she traded her jeans and hooded sweatshirt for dress slacks and heels and narrated a slide show that spilled onto the wall.

"This (project) will be with me for the rest of my life, so it's kinda sad because I feel like a part of me will be lost not coming to this house after 13 months," Lauren says. "But I'm excited to give it to the girls. They need it, and hopefully, this house will let these five moms get their lives back on track."

Anna Roe, a UNCG senior from Reidsville, stayed, too. And like Lauren, she spent 13 months on Susan's House.

She once was a little girl who followed her dad on home-repair projects. Now, at age 24, she feels she could lead home construction projects.

She's proud of her work at Susan's House, and whenever friends come to town, she takes them by or gives them directions.

"Turn down by Eastside Park," she tells them. "You'll find it."

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It's been a long time coming. But it's been a long time coming for Eastside Park, too.

For more than 20 years, Greensboro has worked to improve Eastside Park, starting in 1988 when voters passed a bond referendum to improve problem properties citywide. That included cleaning up the 200 block of Bingham Street in Eastside Park.

Since then, the city has spent \$4.5 million and nonprofit agencies have built 75 homes to help improve this 10-block rectangle of homes near N.C. A&T.

Susan's House comes near the tail end of this long revitalization project. It's built on three lots, and it'll be run by Youth Focus, a local nonprofit that works with at-risk youth.

It's still a tough block, that short stretch of York Street where Susan's House sits. Neighbors talk about break-ins and drug-dealing. Charest can talk about having a gun in his face.

In July, Charest got accosted at the stop light beside John's Curb Market, while he was driving his 1991 British racing green Miata. A guy pointed a .38-caliber handgun at Charest's head and demanded his wallet and his car. Charest gave up the wallet, and while getting out of his car, the robber ran off.

It was 3 in the afternoon. The guy with a gun was later arrested. He was no older than 14.

Immediately after the robbery, Charest called Susan's House less than a block away and sent everyone home. The next morning, he talked to his students.

"If anyone doesn't feel safe to come here, you can walk away," he told them. "Myself or the university won't penalize you."

No one left. A month later, two of the big front windows at Susan's House got smashed one night. Over the next week, Charest walked out to York Street and talked to the people he always saw passing by.

"I don't know who did this, and I don't know if you have any control of the activities around here, but we have no money to replace these windows," he told them. "This is a community project. Please leave the building alone."

Since then, nothing has been stolen from or vandalized at Susan's House.

"There is certainly some risk being a part of this redevelopment effort, but it's worth the risk," says Chuck Hoderne, executive director of Youth Focus.

"The city and police will work with us, and redevelopment efforts I think are worthwhile because it's taking a neighborhood that is struggling and heading it into a positive direction," Hoderne says. "That's a good thing to be a part of."

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Now, to the name: My Sister Susan's House.

It honors Susan Cupito, the program director for the YWCA's Teen Parent Mentor Program.

She's worked with young mothers for 20 years, and she's wanted to create something like Susan's House in Greensboro since 2001.

She's the one who found Charest.

It was February 2007, at a luncheon at UNCG, when she heard about Charest's first Urban Studio project: a 1,050-square-foot house in Greensboro's Glenwood neighborhood.

As he was leaving, she stopped him at the door.

"If you ever want another project, I'd love to talk to you," she told him.

And that's how it began.

"It was just a five-minute conversation with him, and look what it is now," Cupito, a mother of four daughters, said a few days ago. "Seems like it was meant to be."

Built with a \$550,000 deferred state loan and supported by a \$400,000 federal grant, Susan's House is expected to open by March 1.

It's four times larger than Charest's first Urban Studio house in Glenwood, and it's full of energy efficiencies, environmentally friendly construction and hip-looking features .

It's got six bedrooms, high ceilings, big windows and walls covered with paint colors called "black fox" and "nervy hue," and almost every corner follows Charest's architectural mantra: Celebrate the edge.

Walk with him through Susan's House. Like a sculptor in his studio, he'll point out every minute detail.

"It's seductive," Charest says of the house he designed. "Not like pornography. It's more like a lacy brassiere, a French bustier. That's what I'm talking about."

Susan's House will complement the house for young mothers Youth Focus opened in High Point eight years ago, and it'll become a model of collaboration between nonprofits and two institutions, UNCG and GTCC.

But mostly, it'll be seen as one big classroom by people like Lauren Goodrum and Anna Roe.

Their classroom with the cranky sage.

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