

THEY'RE THE 'BEST'



SUBMITTED PHOTO

The River Falls High School Marching Wildcats took two firsts and all caption awards, including Best Musical Performance, Best Visual Show, Best Color Guard and Best Percussion, last weekend at competitions in Schofield and Merrill. Its show, "Somewhere Over a Nightmare," features an 18-foot bed which introduces the show and is used throughout the show for various color guard and band maneuvers. The 115-member band competes next in Chippewa Falls this Saturday and in Menomonie on Sunday.



DEBBIE GRIFFIN PHOTO

Our Neighbors' Place homeless shelter holds an open house this weekend to celebrate completing improvements to its property at 215 W. Cedar St., where it offers temporary, emergency shelter to families in Pierce and St. Croix counties who have no place to sleep.

Celebrate a home for the homeless

BY DEBBIE GRIFFIN
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In just less than three years, a dedicated group and its many supporters managed to develop, form and start a homeless shelter in River Falls.

Our Neighbors' Place celebrates the opening of its remodeled and improved property at 215 W. Cedar St., with an open house this weekend: 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday or 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Sunday, with a 1 p.m. ceremony (Sunday) to dedicate the quadruplex building.

ONP plans on helping the first families move into the building Oct. 10.

Director Mary Jo Sutton, along with key organizers Carole Mottaz and Sue Watters, reported that in the weeks leading up to the open house, volunteers were busily finishing improvement tasks.

Final touches have included replacing baseboards and window trim, hanging bathroom mirrors and installing towel racks, caulking windows, hanging a steel door in the office, painting siding, cleaning everywhere and putting in insulation.

Preparing to open the shelter also found volunteers moving furniture, hanging curtains, laying rugs, finishing kitchens, assembling beds and situating assorted linens.

The upcoming open house represents the culmination of work that started with ONP forming late in 2008 and holding a summit with local churches — often an entity to which the homeless turn for help — in early 2009. Shortly after, the group opened a transitional house with the help of St. Bridget Catholic Church.

It also continued pursuing its bigger vision — a three-part concept to help homeless families in Pierce and St. Croix counties that includes transitional housing; the Day Center; and the four apartments in the Cedar Street building where clients can live temporarily.

ONP's research revealed that besides Grace Place in Somerset and limited alternative space offered by Servant of the Shepherd Church in River Falls, families with no place to sleep have no other options in Pierce or St. Croix county.

ONP opened the Day Center on Riverwalk in 2009, which acts as a referral service plus offers literacy education,

an address at which clients can receive mail, computer and Internet access and information about other social services.

The Day Center also provides clients interview clothes from The Closet, an open-to-the-public store carrying gently used clothes.

Watters explains the evolution of the Cedar Street quadruplex. ONP leased four apartments in a building on West Johnson Street from August 2010 to August 2011 — housing homeless families there with the intention of raising enough funds to buy the whole building, which has eight total apartments.

"As it went — with the economic downturn," said Watters, "we did not feel it was wise to take on as large a loan as would be needed to pay off a building of that size."

That led ONP to explore the option of downsizing and instead buying the quadruplex on West Cedar Street.

The organization raised half of \$240,000 purchase price and now needs to raise the other half in less than three years to repay an interest-free loan extended to it by the city.

COMMUNITY PITCHES IN

Three years of fundraising found many different parts of the community — individuals, businesses and other entities — giving to make the shelter a reality.

The 2010 and 2011 Kinni River Trout Trot proceeds benefitted ONP. The Martin Luther King, Jr. community breakfast proceeds went to ONP, as did funds raised at the UW-River Falls' Bowls of Hope events.

Greenwood Elementary grew food in its garden that it donated; the Otto Bremer Foundation gave the gift of a big grant. The River Falls Area Hospital donated money, and the St. Croix Valley Habitat for Humanity helped with renovation of the Cedar Street property.

Several area churches give regularly to sponsor apartments, pay utilities and otherwise minister to the families seeking shelter. Numerous are other examples of how the community helped make the shelter a reality through creative fundraising.

Why? The instance of homelessness in Pierce and St. Croix counties is higher than most people think.



SUBMITTED PHOTOS

Our Neighbors' Place volunteers have spent months preparing four apartments for occupancy. Left to right Carole Mottaz, Lori Snyder and Joni Henning.



Many different people gave time, talent and/or treasure to help spiff up the quadruplex property on Cedar Street to house families in need from Pierce and St. Croix counties.

In a previous story about ONP, Mottaz told how she worked in the school district for 20 years and saw heart-breaking scenarios of children moving dozens of times in a year and families sleeping in their cars. Law enforcement can confirm that sometimes, people call or show up saying, "We have no place to sleep tonight."

Families that take shelter at ONP also get guidance, weekly visits, help budgeting and

looking for work, plus other support. Mottaz said the idea is to help such families get on their feet and overcome challenges.

She summarized, "Our goal is to strengthen families and empower families to be able to take full control of their lives."

Get more information, donate or volunteer by going to ONP's website: www.ourneighborsplace.org.

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