

Duffy school becomes home for seniors

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(Photo: Joe F. Moore/Staff Photographer, Joe F. Moore/Staff Photographer)

FLORENCE A widowed senior citizen on limited income was not expecting to find anywhere elegant to live when she decided to downsize and leave her single home.

Then she visited her old Duffy School, which has just been converted into the Duffy Apartments. Impressed, she applied, was accepted and moved into a one-bedroom unit a few weeks ago.

"Now I live in this beautiful place, so beautiful I can't believe it is low-income," Melva Gilanyi, 83,

told a crowd of several hundred at last week's grand opening celebration for the newly renovated complex.

Duffy Apartments is a joint venture of MEND (Moorestown Ecumenical Neighborhood Development) and Conifer, LLC of Mount Laurel.

Matthew Reilly, MEND president and CEO, said all 53 units were occupied as of last week.

Gilanyi has good memories of going to school there and feels at home. "It's like living in luxury." She said her apartment is so spacious she was able to take almost all of her house's furniture with her. The kitchen has wooden cabinets and all doorways and bathrooms are handicapped accessible.



(Photo: Joe F. Moore/Staff Photographer, Joe F. Moore/Staff Photographer)

Widower Ralph Foulks is a 90-year-old World War II veteran and 1943 Duffy School graduate. Born and raised in Florence, he moved back from Lakeland, Florida, to become a tenant.

"I love this," he said, reminiscing about sitting in a maple tree on the school grounds many years ago.

The community, at 225 W. Second St., is for senior citizens aged 62 and over. Thirty-five apartments are in the historic school and another 18 are in a three-story addition.



(Photo: Joe F. Moore/Staff Photographer, Joe F. Moore/Staff Photographer)

Reilly said the redevelopment maintained the historic nature of the building, such as the tin ceilings. The gymnasium is now a large community room. Its wooden floor has been retained and refinished with its original markings for basketball games.

"This senior affordable housing project preserves a part of the history and fabric of Florence Township," said Mayor Craig Wilkie. "Florence Township commends MEND and its partner, Conifer, for its diligence and commitment to this very worthwhile community project."

After the building was closed in 2007, the township began seeking options for its redevelopment.

"This project is a wonderful example of preserving our history by saving this facility and repurposing it in a manner that will serve the community," Reilly said. "The Florence Township region needs affordable housing for our seniors so they can continue to comfortably live in a high-quality apartment they can afford."

Old clothing factory gets new appearance

Built in 1870, the Florence School No.1 had four classrooms and was the first public school in Florence. It was expanded several times, first in 1924 and again in the 1950s, turning it into a K-8 school to accommodate growth in the community. It had been renamed the Marcella L. Duffy School after a principal whom Gilanyi and other former students recall as an excellent educator but strict disciplinarian.

"It is very rewarding as a developer to see this building preserved so that it can continue to be an asset to the community for generations to come," said Sam Leone, Conifer vice president of development.



(Photo: Joe F. Moore/Staff Photographer, Joe F. Moore/Staff Photographer)

The \$14 million redevelopment project was funded with Federal Low Income Housing Tax Credits, Federal Historic Tax Credits, Florence Township Affordable Housing Trust funds, Burlington County HOME funds, and a construction loan from TD Bank. Red Stone Equity Partners syndicated the tax credits.

The New Jersey Housing and Mortgage Finance Agency has estimated the project generated approximately \$22 million in one-time economic output and created approximately 133 full-time jobs during construction.

Donna Rederio, the housing agency chief of staff, called the complex "phenomenal."