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Langston Hughes Center expands programs to adults of all ages with emphasis on health

Senior Outreach moves in with aim of being wellness site

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Kaye Spector

Plain Dealer Reporter

The building at East 79th Street and Quincy Avenue began life as an Andrew Carnegie library: built with money donated by the rags-to-riches businessman, an expression of his conviction that the desire to learn can lead to self-improvement.

Today, 95 years later, the building that is now called the Langston Hughes Center still supports that vision of self-education, with an important new focus -- good health.

Following a \$5 million renovation and 3,000-square-foot expansion of the 9,000-square-foot yellow brick structure, a new tenant has moved in: Senior Outreach Services, a 30-year-old nonprofit whose founding mission is to help older adults in Cleveland's Fairfax neighborhood improve their health and, by extension, their independence and quality of life.

For 28 years, the nonprofit had headquarters in a squat, 4,000-square-foot building at East 100th Street and Cedar Avenue. Programs took place in a rented room at nearby St. James AME Church.

In the new, roomy space, the group, known as SOS, intends to expand its role to become a community wellness center for residents of all ages and from a much wider geographic area.

The space that formerly housed the library's children's collection is now a warm yellow-walled activity room with wood floors where five days a week adults age 60 and older gather for tai chi, fitness classes, music and art therapy, line dancing and massage therapy.

Future programming, such as belly dancing, yoga and ballroom dancing, will cater to working people who require early-morning, evening and weekend classes.

On the first floor of the new addition is a reception area, a big, bright dining room and a large, shiny kitchen with long stainless-steel tables, where Lynch plans to hold nutrition and cooking classes.

Then there's lunch. Daily, SOS produces nearly 500 noontime meals for seniors, with dishes such as stuffed cabbage, roast beef and gravy, and pork roast that are either delivered to neighborhood homes or served in the dining room.

The former adult room has been reconfigured into a skylighted lobby and a cozy meeting room, perfect for the workshops and seminars on topics such as nutrition, chronic-disease prevention and techniques for living healthier. A financial seminar was held in March.

The library's three fireplaces, which many in the neighborhood remember fondly, are still there.

And former basement meeting rooms have been refurbished, with plans to create spaces for weightlifting and exercise, reiki or other touch therapies and clothes-changing or showers.

"Everything we do will have a therapeutic value," said SOS executive director Delores Lynch. "We feel very strongly that people can come here and have fun, but it must be therapeutic."

SOS's new housemate at Langston Hughes is the Cleveland Clinic, which will move into the upstairs half of the 13,000-square-foot addition on the building's north side.

Residents can now go there to receive free physicals, immunizations, counseling, basic health screenings and help in navigating other health-care services.

Patients' Clinic medical records will be available electronically through special software paid for with a grant. Other donors gave computers.

A volunteer physician or a resident, a nurse practitioner and two nurses will staff the center.

The Clinic also will have a role outside the second floor. Education will be a major thrust, said Pamela Marshall Holmes, the Clinic's senior director for community outreach. Education on health issues - or lack of it - is a major reason for the disparity in health levels among economic groups, Holmes said.

Topics at Langston Hughes will include diabetes, obesity and heart health. And residents can take the same stop-smoking program available to Clinic employees.

The library property was enlarged to two acres by adding adjacent lots. A large garden will be planted behind the center, where Holmes plans classes to teach how to grow fresh vegetables.

The Clinic's goal is good health, as well as being a good neighbor, Holmes said.

The building, which has been in private hands since at least 1975, was built in 1914 and was called the Quincy Avenue library. Fairfax Renaissance Development Corp., which owns the building, raised the money and helped pay for the renovation.

The building is silver LEED-certified - meaning it is energy- and material-efficient and healthy to inhabit, as certified by the U.S. Green Building Council - and was awarded a top honor for historic preservation from the Cleveland Restoration Society on Wednesday.

"It's a perfect use," said Vickie Johnson, Fairfax Renaissance Development executive director. "People feel emotional about saving it. For so many, they had and still have connections there."

Lillian Selinas, 74, began going to the Langston Hughes Center because her daughter was urging her to "get out and do something."

Selinas, who lives in the Glenville neighborhood, retired in July. Her daughter teaches line dancing at the center.

Selinas started taking classes in chair exercise and tai chi, which she calls "very relaxing." Now she's starting to stay for lunch and socializing afterward.

"The ladies are very friendly," she said. "I enjoy being with the class and I'm learning something all at the same time."

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter:

kspector@plaind.com, 216-999-3904