SPITZ: Hidden gem in Framingham 'transforms lives'

By Julia Spitz/Daily News staff
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Selectman Charlie Sisitsky called it "a miracle" and "a hidden gem," and Town Manager Bob Halpin said it reflects Framingham's long tradition of caring.

But perhaps the most impressive endorsement of what the Bethany Hill School can offer comes from a resident whose children grew up in the unique affordable housing/education center on the expansive Southside property that's also home to the Bethany Health Care Center.

"If we hadn't lived at Bethany Hill, I don't think Molly would have even gone to college," said Bill Blake.

Molly Danforth, the youngest of Blake's children, moved to the Bethany Hill School, along with her parents and three older brothers, when she was 5.

"Molly's mother and I had just gotten sober," Blake told those gathered at an event this week celebrating the housing/education center's 20th anniversary. Sadly, Danforth's mother died not long afterward, but the support of staff, volunteers and fellow residents helped nurture the family, Blake said.

Thanks to the community support, "I have so much pride in what these children have accomplished." Two sons work in the construction field; another, an Army veteran, is a police officer in Brookline, Blake said.

And Danforth, who recently graduated from Regis College in Weston with her bachelor's degree in nursing, has applied to work on an Indian reservation in Oklahoma.

"For that, I blame Sister Denise," Blake joked of the influence Sister Denise Kelly, program director, has had.

Seeing children blossom and adults discover untapped potential are among the "little miracles" at Bethany Hill School, said Kelly.

"I like to compare my work at Bethany Hill to a garden," she said. There's the metaphorical garden of planting seeds of change in residents' lives, but also a literal garden where residents can tend to their plantings and learn from what nature provides.

"After 20 years, we have proof ... investing in education works," said Donna Hale, chairwoman of the board of trustees.

The education can range from parenting classes to financial planning, computer tutorials to literacy help, but an education component is a requirement for those living in one of the 40 units.

"The mission ... is to transform lives," Kelly said.

The gathering this week was to celebrate the success of the unique nonprofit that's sponsored by the Sisters of Saint Joseph, has a partnership with South Middlesex Opportunity Council for several of the units, relies on a host of volunteers, and is primarily funded through grants and donations. The event also celebrated recent repairs enabled by a Housing and Urban Development grant and town-administered federal grant.

But mostly the morning was about celebrating the successes of past and present residents who have made the most of opportunities they've found at the Bethany Hill School, and from there found ways large and small to help others.

"It's more than a place to live," said Marianne McLaughlin, board of trustees vice chairwoman. "It's a community."

More information about the unique community can be found at www.bethanyhillschool.org.

"This is truly a miracle on the hill," Sisitsky said.

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