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News

Bethesda marks 100 years

By Becky Thielke for the Daily Times

Bethesda Lutheran Homes and Services Inc. marked its first 100 years for providing services and supports for individuals with developmental disabilities on Saturday with a "Bless This House" event.

A full day of activities got under way with the dedication of the newly constructed fully accessible tree house at Bethesda's Camp Matz which is located between the main campus and County Trunk A.



Bethesda marked its centennial celebration Saturday starting with the dedication of its fully accessible tree house at Camp Matz. Shown are visitors and clients walking on the ramp after touring the structure. (Becky Thielke/Daily Times)

The design of the structure was developed by Forever Young Tree Houses of Burlington, Vt., a not-for-profit facility focusing on the building of universally accessible tree houses for camps, communities, organizations and schools throughout the United States.

The tree house is approximately 500 square feet and sits about 12 feet off the ground. It is reached by a ramp about 200 feet in length with level landings every 25 feet to be able to turn a wheelchair around.

Chris Haake, builder, said this was the quickest they've ever built a tree house. Normally it takes three months to construct a tree house from beginning to end, but Bethesda's took six weeks.

"It makes me happy to build a project like this to get kids and adults up there who normally can't. It was gratifying," he said.

James Roth, designer/builder, said the tree house design was largely motivated by the cabins and woods at Camp Matz. He said each structure design is unique to the trees they are constructed in.

"Forever Young Tree Houses has partnerships

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blossoming all over the country. We are so happy we can include a playful element to everyone's life," Roth said, adding this was their seventh tree house.

Builders of the project were five members of Laborers for Christ, a program which operates as part of the Lutheran Church Extension Fund. It is an organized group of hard working Christian men and women

volunteering part of their retirement time to work for Lutheran congregations, schools and social ministry groups who construct their own buildings. Denny Tellinghuisen and his wife Flo, of Sioux Falls, S.D., are members of Laborers For Christ and helped build the Camp Matz tree house.

"This was really a fun project for us. This was a completely different project than normal," Denny Tellinghuisen said. He and his wife are more used to building day cares and parish hall additions.

"What a privilege it is for Laborers For Christ to be here to help Bethesda's dream come true," he added.

Dr. David Geske, Bethesda president and chief executive officer, said plans for the tree house were discussed with Bethesda's Board of Directors last November.

"Like all of the blessings over the years this will be one of them. Like all we do at Bethesda it's done to the glory of God," Geske said.

Miss Wisconsin Molly McGrath and Bethesda client Patty Shaeffer cut the ribbon to conclude the dedication. Shaeffer was a member of the planning committee in charge of organizing the day's events.

Norma Schultz, who attended Bethesda's celebration with Nancy Baty, a dear friend of hers who lives at Bethesda, said, "I have great ties with the clients because I've known them for all these years. They're like family. I've experienced coming out to camp with all the clients so there is just so much more for them to enjoy." Schultz was employed at Bethesda for 29 years working as a night supervisor and in programming.

Following the ceremony a pig roast and children's games were held.

An open house for the newly remodeled Dierker building was held in the afternoon. The renovations were part of a multiyear, \$26 million project to improve campus buildings and outdoor space. Phase one of the project included renovations to the Dierker Buildings, and a new programming area where clients work and take part in activities.

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Changes to the Dierker Building included renovations of the home units to provide private rooms, comfortable dining rooms and modern kitchens, Nate Keller, project manager from the Bentley Company, said.

The first part of phase two included the construction of a new corporate office on the campus. The second part of phase two involved renovations of the Clara Werner Dormitory and "the Neighborhood," a community of businesses located inside the Dierker Building which include a bank, a hair salon, deli and medical offices. The second part of phase two also included part of the Werner Building being renovated into a day care.

"This is a special day. We started this about five years ago and to think it is here is a blessing. The Lord has truly blessed this ministry," Geske said.

Rich Tennessen, vice president of Eppstein-Uhen Architects, said, "We are truly honored and blessed to be part of this mission. It's not the blessing of a facility but what happens here on a daily basis."

Two new phases of the project include demolition of the Ritter and part of the Olson building to provide a new area called Pingel Commons as well as demolition of the Golisch building to give more of an open access to the chapel.

Ardis Loeber, administrator, closed the dedication with a strong message of working together.

"Today we continue to make this a home for the individuals who live here. It took all of you to make this possible. We couldn't have done this without working together," she said.

On April 13, 1904, Bethesda opened its doors in a rented building on Margaret Street and was called The Faith Home. There were five clients and eight staff members. The Faith Home was unable to renew its lease and moved to Milwaukee for three years. In 1909, the facility moved back to Watertown and relocated to new quarters constructed on 40 acres of donated land. It offered jobs and training to the people they supported. Some early jobs included basketweaving and rug making. When more land was added the facility began farming and raising their own food.

Bethesda services all states east of the Rocky Mountains and is divided into four regions, North Central, Gulf, Central and Northeast regions.