

DAILY NEWS

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Home (for mentally ill) is where heart is

Smiling broadly under his chef's toque, Paul Langley was supervising caterers in the kitchen of the Macombs Residence, where he lives, cooking trays of pigs-in-a-blanket, tiny crab cakes and chicken tenders that were then passed around to visitors.

The crowd there was celebrating a year since the residence in Morris Heights opened, and everyone was smiling and nibbling the tasty hors d'ouvres, posing for photos, seeming to be old friends.

It wasn't always so cordial.

That's because the Macombs Residence run by Services for the Under-Served provides nice studio apartments and services for mentally ill, chronically homeless people.

And Amelia Ramos, who lives next door, wanted no part of it when she heard of the plan a couple years ago.

"People were concerned ... we were afraid, we didn't want it," said Ramos. "I went to their website and read some of them were coming out of prison. We have schools nearby."

Bernice Williams, chairwoman of Community Board 5's human services committee, opposed it.

"There was resistance, we felt the neighborhood was oversaturated with these types of residences and agencies," said Williams.

Sallie Smith, who has lived in Morris Heights for 45 years, said, "They open these places and they don't continue to follow the residents, or there's not



enough staff. A lot of times, it's not the residents, but the visitors who are problems."

Yet all were there last week at the luncheon, mingling with the staff and residents.

"They have opened the doors, and we've seen the other side," said Ramos.

"They are very good neighbors," said Williams. "I have never seen so many beautiful people."

"If I ever got in this situation I would come here," said Smith.

Judith Jackson, chief of staff of SUS, said, "In the beginning there was a lot of misunderstanding about what we were bringing into the community. We worked with them to educate them and over time we won them over."

She said her group met with Williams' committee three times before they even could get a meeting with the full community board.

Donna Colonna, CEO of SUS, said most of the 48 residents come from transitional housing. They are all mentally ill, but must be able to live independently.

After months or years of city shelters or the streets, coming to a clean, safe, apartment with a big window is an amazing experience.



Paul Langley, who lives at the Macombs Residence, serves snacks. Photo by Victor Chu

Langley was proud to host guests in his home for the last eight months, after years in shelters. He has a welcome mat outside his door.

"I wake up every morning with a smile and thank God," he said. "There is a little bit of fear because of my illness that I may lose it."

He said he has been bipolar since his teens, but wasn't diagnosed until several years ago. He was socially promoted and graduated high school, but couldn't read.

Having a home "was a lift off my shoulders. ... I was able to study and get my culinary arts certificate from Project Renewal," he said.

He was helping with the lunch because it was a special occasion. He has a full-time job as a sous chef in the cafe in the Time-Life Building.

Another success story is Esther Pierre-Louis, 42, who has lived at the Macombs Residence since last December.

She has been homeless pretty much since she was 7 years old. She uses a cane because she was born with cerebral palsy, and wears a hearing aid.

She was dressed chicly in a teal dress and gray, ruffled cardigan, and clutched the speech she was to give to the assembly.

"I'm giving testimony about my experiences," she said.

Now that she has a stable home, she attends classes at College of New Rochelle three days a week, working toward her degree in communications.

"I love it here. ... I have a real refrigerator, and a stove!" she said. "I cook and bake."

She self-published a book of poetry, "Colors of the Wind."

Carmen Nunez, the first tenant to move into the building when it opened last Nov. 9, proudly showed her home, which she personalized with a pretty comforter and flowered shower curtain.

She got choked up when she said, in Spanish, that getting the apartment "was like Santa Claus had come."

poshaughnessy@nydailynews.com