

A new life for an old building in M'burgh



As the peeling paint on the outside attests, the work on the Russian Orthodox Church on Route 145 in Middleburgh is not complete but major strides have been made on the interior including a new worship area. An open house, which will include tours and a concert, is planned for this summer.

By David Avitabile

The old brick building on the hill overlooking Middleburgh has had many different tenants over the years.

The huge two-story brick building was originally constructed just over 100 years ago to house the poor of Schoharie County. After serving in that capacity until 1942, it was used as a friary, by Middleburgh Central School for elementary school classes and as a home for the elderly. In the 1970s it almost became a minimum-security state prison.

Now the Route 145 landmark has a new lease on life.

In May 2010, members of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCORA) paid \$275,000 for the building and its 59 acres in a county tax sale.

Since then, restoring and refurbishing the 25-room building has been a labor of love for many volunteers.

After they purchased the property, the volunteers and church members knew their work had only begun.

On the outside, a large toppled tree lay in the overgrown field, the building was covered by ivy, but by far the situation was worse inside.

Once he stepped inside the former Mountain View Manor Home for Adults, George Lukin, member of the church and a professional builder, knew it would be a long-term rebuilding project.

"Everything had to be refurbished," he said.

He is one of the principals in a general contracting and construction management firm that refurbishes hospitals, hotels, and other commercial and retail businesses. That experience came in handy when Mr. Lukin embarked on transforming the former adult home into a church and an Orthodox retreat and cultural center.

The old tile roof leaked, damaging many of the second floor rooms.

"Everything was destroyed by water," he explained.

After temporary repairs were made to the roof, the first items to be tackled were the heating, electrical systems and windows. In all, 178 windows had to be replaced with more energy-efficient models.

"We were paying to heat Middleburgh," Mr. Lukin said.

The change in the efficiency of the building was immediate.

Fire alarm and sprinkler systems were in place but everything else had and has to be restored in the building, which had been vacant for five years. In addition to being damaged by the weather, the building also suffered from some vandalism while waiting for a new owner.

Despite the weather damage and the vandalism, Mr. Lukin admitted the building was in relatively good shape.

"The brick and stone walls made it structurally sound."

The first areas to be worked on were the rooms on the first floor.

Three layers of flooring were removed. Some of the rooms were fixed up for volunteers who came up to Middleburgh from downstate on the weekends.

The first area to be completed and blessed in the fall was the church, dedicated to The New Martyrs of Russia. There was a little head start since the church is in what had been used as a chapel for the adult home.

The cherry wood altar shines and holds many Orthodox Church icons.

A make-shift kitchen and dining room have been fixed up for those who live there during the week. Among those who live there full-time is Bishop Andronik.

It will take more time to complete the work on the second floor, which suffered more water damage.

Once done, the work will be worth it, Mr. Lukin said.

"The view of the Valley is beautiful."

Still remaining in the second floor is the water-damaged yellow shag carpeting that probably was installed over 40 years ago.

Ten to 15 volunteers religiously travel up almost every weekend to work on the building.

More volunteers are available during the summer but the work had been progressing year-round.

"Everything, little by little, is getting done," Mr. Lukin said.

The glittering golden dome, with its cross, symbolic of Russian Orthodox Churches, was installed about the church in November.

In addition to volunteering their time and labor, church members have also donated money.

He does not know how much was spent on the renovations thus far but it has been more than the purchase price and the costs keep climbing.

While they have been toiling on the building, church members have been working on forming a bond with their new community.

"People have been driving by while the work is being done and now it is time for them to see what is being done on the inside," Mr. Lukin added.

"We want them to see the church and know who we are."

Church members also want more local people to get involved in the church.

Once a month, the vespers or liturgy will be in English.

"We want to bring people in," Mr. Lukin explained. "We need to build a base."

They want a core of local people to participate, helping to run the mass in order to create an Orthodox community.

During other weeks of the month, the liturgy will be read in old Slavonic.

Volunteers and church members who have made the pilgrimage to the new church have been pleased with the setting and the environs, Mr. Lukin added.

Many of those who have come find it very calming.

"You come to a retreat like this to heal your soul," he added.

Many visitors like to stroll around the grounds, Mr. Lukin added.

The old hay barn, which still contains a basketball court, is used for storage. There are also other outbuildings, along with a pond.

"It's really like paradise," Mr. Lukin said while looking around.

As the refurbishing continues, church members are planning a large open house for July 21.

Plans call for a concert of classical music on the lawn, a visit to the church while the choir performs chants from the Orthodox liturgy, some typical Russian food as well as tours of the building.

"For us it is going to be a great event, a big feast, a great joy," Mr. Lukin added.



Carefully crafted icons fill the corner of this room. Pictured is Bishop Andronik who is one of several people who live in the church full-time.



Bishop Andronik stands behind the altar in the new church on Route 145.



The worship area of the Russian Orthodox Church has been completed and features cherry wood with many religious icons.



The glittering golden dome, symbolic of Russian Orthodox Churches, was installed about the church in November and can be seen up and down Route 145.



Many colorful icons are shown in the Russian Orthodox Church.

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