

Woman's Club of Albany revitalizes building, membership

Organization restores historic Steefel house, marks centennial and continues mission of service to community

BY BILL BUELL
Gazette Reporter

Elia Blair and Joseph Steefel can relax. Their building at 725 Madison Ave. in Albany is in very good hands.

The Woman's Club of Albany, started by Blair in 1910, and the structure that houses it, built by Steefel in 1895, were both in a state of deterioration that happily has been reversed. More renovation needs to be done on the actual structure, but those fixes are in the works.

As for the spiritual health of the place, current president Fran Altshuler is convinced that the dark days that prevailed earlier this decade — the club was down to just three members in 2003 — are over. Membership isn't up to its early 20th century standards, when the club had as many as 600 women, but it recently reached the 100 mark and the future looks bright.

"The place was reborn in 2003 due to the efforts of some great women," said Altshuler. "We're adding new members and we recently received word that we did get a grant for \$200,000 in renovations. We're very happy to be celebrating our 100th anniversary, and we're looking forward to our second 100 years."

Altshuler joined in the fall of 2006, was elected president in March of 2009 and in March of this year began a second term.

"I met a woman through a book club and she recommended that I look into it and go to a symposium on woman's issues being held there," said Altshuler. "I was so impressed that very first evening that I joined right on the spot."

The mission of the club is to "maintain an organized center for cooperation among women in the Capital District for civic, literary and charitable works."

"To me, that means we are charged with doing good works for the benefit of our community," said Altshuler, "and that includes preserving our fabulous building. The Environment Protection Fund grant and our capital campaign to raise matching funds will help us with our renovations, including shoring up our stained-glass windows and making the place handicap-accessible. Those are two of our priorities."

Steefel built the house just prior to the turn of the century when he and his brother Bernard were running a clothing store in downtown Albany. Bernard also built a home right next door, on the corner of South Lake and Madison avenues, and a port cochere that connected the two houses remains, now linking the Woman's Club structure to an architectural agency.

DESIRABLE LOCATION

Albany's Washington Park, which extends out to South Lake Avenue, was completed by 1891, and according to Albany City historian Tony Opalka the area was a popular spot to be building new homes around the turn of the century.

"The park was fully developed by that time, and that area would have been a very desirable residential block for the wealthy," said Opalka, who became city historian in 2008.

"The character of the block east of that, Robin and South Lake, is identical to that of Quail and South Lake. East of that they were building high-end row houses, but the

On the Web

- ◆ **The Woman's Club of Albany:** www.womansclubofalbany.org/
- ◆ **Black Women's Association of Albany:** www.bwaaonline.org



SUSAN ROSENTHAL

One of the building's leaded-glass windows.

character of Madison Avenue changes at Quail Street and you begin seeing what was termed at the time as suburban villas. That's what the Steefels built. There were another pair of brothers who built a pair of homes right across Madison Avenue, and there was a big mansion right on the corner of South Lake and Madison, near where the tennis courts are now, that has been demolished."

Opalka said that the Steefels weren't the first to build in the area, the Pine Hills Neighborhood west and south of Madison Avenue having been developed a few years earlier.

"There was an official designation of the Pine Hills Neighborhood in 1890, so there would have been a trolley line coming out Madison to that area," he said. "The Woman's Club now lies just within the Pine Hills Neighborhood Association, but back in 1890 it was a much smaller neighborhood. The boundary today is just about anything west of Lake Avenue."

According to Kim Alvarez, a historic preservation consultant and a member of the club, trying to pigeonhole the house at 725 Madison into one clear category architecturally isn't easy.

"It's been called a Victorian-style house, but I think it's more accurate to say a Prairie style, Arts and Crafts house," she said. "They started building them late in the 19th century and early 20th century, and they had a lot of the same features and attention to detail that the Victorian and Queen Anne period had. Walking through it, you can see it's a very intricate building."

The home, designed by the firm of Stern, Nolan and Stern, indicates that the Steefels' clothing store must have been doing a very good business.

"It was a grand house for the turn of the century, and it had servant quarters in the rear of the building, a beautiful stairwell, a couple of pantries, some wonderfully built pocket doors and a lot of stained-glass windows," Alvarez said.

As for its condition, she says the grant money is coming at the right time.

"My biggest concern is the large bay window on the west side of the building where the stairwell is," she said. "There were probably trees growing too close to the house, but that bay structure and a failing roof need to be stabilized. The brick is crumbling in places and the stained-glass windows are threatened, but they will be addressed. That's what is so wonderful about our revived membership. They are



BILL BUELL/GAZETTE REPORTER

Built in 1895 as the residence of Joseph Steefel, this structure now serves as home to the Woman's Club of Albany, celebrating its 100th anniversary this month. The group moved into Steefel's home at 725 Madison Avenue in 1919.

Club's future looked precarious for a while

Women found building intriguing, decided to join group and help restoration, revive club

BY BILL BUELL
Gazette Reporter

As longtime treasurer of The Woman's Club of Albany, Josie Languish was well aware that things weren't looking so good.

"One year I had 19 dollars and 27 cents in the treasury," said Languish, who turned 100 last week, shortly before the club itself celebrates its centennial on Friday. "That's as low as it got. Then we only had a few members left. People died, they moved away, they just quit. I just thought, 'Oh well, we'll make it up again,' and we did."

For a while, though, it looked as though The Woman's Club of Albany wasn't going to make it much past 90. In 2003, the membership ranks had thinned down to just three: Languish, Eunice Hunter, now 102, and past president Noreen Bobear. The group tried different things to keep the club vibrant, all to no avail.

"We held teas to arouse some interest, we tried a few special programs to bring in new members, we tried just about everything but nothing seemed to work," said Hunter, who lives in South Bethlehem. "People died, other members were getting older and couldn't make it there anymore, and it seemed at that time like people just weren't interested in joining clubs. Their interests were elsewhere."

DISCOVERING A TREASURE

Things began changing when El Loco Restaurant owner Marcia Tolve began looking for a place to celebrate her 20th anniversary as a downtown Albany

business owner.

"A friend of mine had held an event there, and I was looking for some place local but also large enough to hold a lot of people," remembered Tolve. "When I finally saw the place I fell in love with the building, and I can remember wondering to myself, 'Why didn't I know this was here all this time?' It was a beautiful building, but you could tell it was in kind of rough shape."

At the El Loco party were three other women who, like Tolve, were intrigued by the place: Leslie Stein, Patricia Beeler and Corliss Carroll.

"They came to me the next week and said how they wanted to see what they could do to save the place, and they wanted to contact the women that were still running the club," said Tolve. "So we did get together with them and had a lovely meeting. They were very happy that someone was interested in the place. It was getting real close to being turned into a dentist office."

Hunter said that she and Languish met the group with open arms.

"I was so happy that this young and enthusiastic group, lawyers and other people of real merit, were so genuinely interested in helping the club," said Hunter. "These were women who obviously knew what they were doing, and we were simply delighted they wanted to become involved."

Once Tolve and her group got in the mix, other women, including Paula Rosenberg and Connie Hume, came along and made sure the club didn't lose its momentum. Rosenberg helped oversee the club's resurgence as president and was a member of the board, while Hume is a trustee and led the group's workforce that renovated the building's second-floor ballroom in 2005.

"We had some amazingly hardworking people with vision and energy get involved, like Paula Rosenberg and Connie Hume," said Tolve. "I feel great that I had something to do with it, and I guess I tend to be at the nexus of things. But there were so many other women who got involved and did all the hard work."

STAYING INVOLVED

It all might have not come about if Languish and Hunter didn't persevere — and stay so healthy well into their 90s. They both remain involved and are usually in attendance at meetings and other social programs. Languish had joined the club in 1978 after retiring from her job with the Delaware and Hudson Railroad, while Hunter has been a member since 1965.

"I had some friends who had joined and they wanted me to come along with them," said Languish, who lives in Glenmont. "I was retired and I didn't know what to do with myself, so I joined."

Like Languish, Hunter joined after being prompted by a friend.

"I knew this woman who wanted to be a member but she had no way to get there," said Hunter, who also spent 35 years as a 4-H leader. "So I picked her up and drove her there and ended up joining myself. At the time they had a very strict jury of people and you had to pass their test. They determined if you were let in or not. Fortunately, they abolished that a long time ago."

The group now has about 100 members, according to current president Fran Altshuler.

"Our membership consists of vibrant, committed and caring women who are passionate about each other, the community and this building," said Altshuler. "We're looking toward our second 100 years now,

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FRAN ALTSHULER

President, Woman's Club of Albany

committed to the mission of restoring this house."

The Woman's Club of Albany moved into the house two years after the death of Joseph Steefel in 1917. It had been organized nine years earlier by Blair, who was already serving as president of the New York State Federation of Woman's Clubs.

"We don't really know too much about her but

we expect to learn more as we continue to go through our archives," said Pam Robinson, co-chairwoman of the archives committee, which was formed two months ago. "It's been so much fun going through all the old records and learning about all the club did. They were very interested in building a better community."

COMMUNITY ISSUES

Among the things The Woman's Club of Albany championed in its early days were trash collection, milk and meat inspection, and higher pay for teachers.

"They also pushed for the first female probation officer, dedicated solely to women and were also involved in a clean-up Albany campaign," said Robinson. "They went to every single gas station in the city and asked them to put a trash barrel by the pump, they urged the city to put them along the roads and sidewalks, and they had little stickers everywhere telling people not to litter."

That kind of activity continues today.

"We host meetings for The

Capital Region Sponsor-A-Scholar Program that matches adult mentors with college-bound high school students," said Altshuler. "We raise money for a lot of things, including the regional food banks, and we also help out with the Tulip Festival each year."

"We're looking to partner up with similar groups, like the Black Women's Association of Albany, and see how we can help them," said Altshuler. "We want to expand our collaborations with the entire community, and we want to increase the diversity in our membership."

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