**Wood Street Commons**

**Downtown, Pittsburgh, Pa.**

Wood Street Commons, at Third Avenue and Wood Street in downtown Pittsburgh isn’t a building that shouts out as you pass by, but if you stop a minute and follow the graceful rise of its 16 stories, you’ll see the carved letters, “YMCA,” and a bronze plaque marking the level to which flood waters rose in March 1936. The building stands in the midst of Point Park University’s downtown development, across the street from the Carlyle’s upscale condominiums, in good company, present and past.

Edward J. Weber designed the YMCA building in 1912 for the architectural firm of his friend, Benno Janssen, who created the William Penn Hotel, Mellon Institute, the Pittsburgh Athletic Association, and Latoure, Edgar Kaufmann’s Fox Chapel home. According to Al Tannler of the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation (PHLF), the building stands in the Fourth Avenue National Register Historic District. PHLF docents conduct walking tours of the downtown area from June through September, and know when every brick was laid and every slab poured, as well as some personal tidbits.

The building now serves another purpose, unique to its urban setting. In 1986 when the YMCA moved to a new location and the Wood Street building was for sale, its low-income residents remained in limbo, indicative of the lack of low income housing. Local foundations, county officials, and social workers came together to prevent the residents from going adrift. Developer Tom Mistick, a key player, said at the time, “The people [at the Commons] are extremely fragile. They need safe and affordable housing.”

A partnership between Mistick’s real estate management company and Community Human Services Corporation (CHSC) with the strong commitment of former CHSC Housing Director Phil Pappas and the Allegheny County Department of Human Services, with funding from foundations, the federal government, and help from the late Senator John Heinz, III, bought and refurbished the 16-story building, creating 258 single-bedroom units on one side and commercial office space on the other. Once again, in November 2008, when the county moved offices from the building, and the mortgage became a problem, the county, Urban Redevelopment Authority, and state and local foundations rose to the occasion, patching together funding to pay off the mortgage and keep residents in their homes.

Resident Bill Prosser volunteers in the computer lab helping other residents perform job searches, “We’re one big community. We look out for each other,” he says. All photos Bette McDevitt.
The former YMCA, now Wood Street Commons, rises 16 stories above downtown Pittsburgh.
Alvin Morton, author and proud World War II Air Force veteran, has enjoyed living at the Commons for 32 years. "When I leave this building, I have the city at my feet."
Alvin Morton lived in the downtown Y when the original transformation took place and remembers that the construction went on around the residents’ living quarters without disturbing them. Morton stayed on, and has lived at the Commons for 32 years. Downtown living suits him. “When I leave this building,” says Morton, “I have the city at my feet.”

For Morton, it’s all about feet. He doesn’t own a car. After breakfast in his comfortable room—he could also eat in the Café Commons on the lower level of the building where affordable breakfasts and dinners are served every day—he walks through Point State Park. Morton has lunch downtown at the Federal Building or the Presbyterian Church on Sixth Avenue, which offers cooked meals Monday through Friday, then he spends four hours at the Carnegie Library’s downtown branch, reading daily newspapers.

Morton is both a reader and a writer; in 1998, he wrote The Noble Spirit, a book about his experiences in the Eighth Air Force in World War II. “I moseyed into Dorrance Publishing on Smithfield Street one day and pitched my idea for a book about my wartime experience, and they liked it,” he says. Morton spent the next a year-and-a-half writing his story longhand, then he hired a typist to prepare the manuscript. “The first edition sold out,” he says, “and we did another printing. There are two left at the History Center Gift shop. Better get one before it’s sold out.”

Bill Prosser, who has lived at Wood Street Commons for 12 years, is more representative of the residents than Morton. Prosser spends most of his days in the computer lab on the lower level where, with help from classes at Carnegie Library, he taught himself to use the computer. “I volunteer here and help other residents do job searches and prepare resumes,” he says. And he, too, likes the city at his feet. “It’s easy for me to get to my doctor appointments by bus. I take breakfast and dinner here, and sometimes for lunch I go down to the Red Door at St. Mary’s on Stanwyx Street.”

Thirty two beds are dedicated to homeless individuals in a non-traditional shelter program. These residents have single rooms, rather than a large (dormitory style) room with cots for sleeping, and most of these residents, upon receiving social and medical services, become paying residents of the Commons.

Fifteen rooms are set aside for a “Bridge Housing Program” for people with chronic mental illness. On-site staff members provide a supportive living environment.

Director Jeff Ash, who became the building manager under the recent arrangement, and other staff members work hard to create a community for all the residents, many of whom have made their way through troubled waters to find this safe harbor. Ash stresses that the common denominator for the residents are the downtown location and the social services; they’re the glue that holds Wood Street Commons together. “I feel part of a family,” says Prosser. “If I’m not seen around, my friends check on me. Sometimes people are unable to get out, so we help each other. It might be us the next time. We’re one big community. And the staff members are good sounding boards, if we have problems.” His words speak well for Wood Street Commons and for our community.

Wood Street Commons
304 Wood St.
Pittsburgh, PA 15222
(412) 765-3302

Bette McDevitt has written many feature articles for this magazine, including “Buck McGovern: I Have Lived History” in the Fall 2008 issue.