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Fresh air, fresh start for families

Family Resource's \$6 million campaign seeks to create year-round retreat center

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By Len Barcoucky, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The woods that border the green-and-white cabins and dining hall at the Family Resources Retreat Center are usually quiet this time of year. The children who attend summer camp here are back in school, and only a few families or individuals come for education and recreation programs once the weather turns cold.

The 69-year-old facility, which straddles the Cranberry-Marshall boundary, is minutes away from major highways and shopping centers. The sounds of traffic and commerce, however, are muted. Meadows, walking trails, a small lake and tall trees make the retreat center a natural refuge for the 8,000 children and adults who visit each year.

"Most people don't even know all this exists," said Andi Fischhoff, spreading her arms to encompass the cabins, dining hall and recently finished playground. She is development director of Family Resources, the Pittsburgh-based social service organization that runs the retreat center.

Plans are under way to make the former fresh-air camp a place where families can gather year-round for outdoor activities, counseling and a break from the pressures of their daily lives.



Architectural rendering of the dining hall to be built at the Family Retreat Center.

Family Resources is in the middle of a campaign to [Click photo for larger image.](#) raise \$6.2 million for major renovations at the 230-acre facility. The funds will be used to build year-round cabins suitable for families, a larger dining hall and a multipurpose field.

About \$3.4 million has been raised from foundations, government and individuals. Steelers Coach Bill Cowher and his wife, Kaye, made a sizeable donation toward the cost of the athletic field. The renewal project has received \$400,000 from a state Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program through the efforts of state Sen. Jane Orie, R-McCandless.

"Our main focus is working with families where children are at risk of abuse," said Dr. Walter Smith, executive director of Family Resources. "They are families that are very stressed, where the parents don't know how to relax and play with their children. The retreat center is a place where people can both experience nature and have new experiences with one another."

During "nurturing weekends" parents and children learn skills and get emotional support, he said. Those lessons are remembered long after the families have gone home.

Ms. Fischhoff tells a favorite story about a mother from Pittsburgh's Hill District who spent time with her two daughters at the retreat center. It was winter and the family had been cooped up inside too long. The mom was cooking in the kitchen when she heard her kids shouting at each other in the next room, Ms. Fischhoff said.

Angry at being interrupted in the midst of supper preparations, she headed to the living room for a confrontation. Then she spied a family photo that had been taken at the retreat center. "It was in a frame her one daughter had made there," Ms. Fischhoff recalled. "They were all hugging each other and smiling."

Seeing the photo helped the mother pull herself together and recall some of the lessons she had learned at the retreat center about discipline options and resolving conflicts, Ms. Fischhoff said.

Renovation plans call for demolition of all but one of the existing cabins. The cottages that will replace them will be heated, insulated and have inside bathrooms. They have been designed to allow families to stay together as a group, Dr. Smith said. The project architect is James A. Cardillo, of Cardillo Design Associates in Cranberry.

The original cabins date to 1937, when the facility began offering children from Pittsburgh an opportunity to eat healthy meals, get outdoor exercise and escape for a few weeks from what was a very smoky city.

While it still offers summer camping, the retreat center focuses more on serving whole families, Dr. Smith said. "Families can get into nature -- hiking, walking, fishing in our lake -- and learn how to have fun together. Those activities can help manage stress and build connections between parents and children."

"We offer time for family bonding," said Jack Stockman, operations supervisor for the retreat center. "Canoeing, fishing, seeing a deer or a groundhog, these are among the experiences family members tell us they will never forget."

More than 130 groups, representing churches, schools, hospitals and other helping organizations, came for retreats last year, he said.

"But each year, we have to turn away two groups for every one we can accommodate," Ms. Fischhoff said.

The existing dining hall can seat 60 to 65 people. That's not a problem in the summer. Between 300 and 400 children attend camp sessions, but they can be fed at five outdoor locations.

That arrangement, however, is not practical during the winter. The new dining hall will have room for 200 people. That number will be about equal to the number of beds available in the cottages.

While no major renovations have been done since the 1930s, the retreat center has received financial help, material and volunteer labor from many organizations over the years. The Cranberry Area Chamber of Commerce, the law firm Eckert Seamans, American Eagle Outfitters, UPMC-Passavant, the Hospital Council of Western Pennsylvania and pupils and teachers from the Shady Side Academy middle school are among the groups that have supported the retreat center in recent years.

Family Resources was created in 1986 after the merger of the Pittsburgh



The dairy bill in the 1940s was about \$1,000 a month when children, escaping the smoke and unhealthy conditions of the city, consumed 70 gallons of milk a day at the fresh air camp, which straddles Marshall and Cranberry.

Click photo for larger image.

Association for the Improvement of the Poor and the Child Abuse Prevention Center.

Twenty years ago, the agency had 25 employees, offered six programs and had a budget of \$675,000. Family Resources now has 200 employees, a \$9.1 million budget and offers 24 programs.

Those parent-education and counseling programs include The Parenting Warmline, a telephone support and referral service, and Parents Anonymous, a volunteer-led, self-help group for parents who fear they might or who have abused their children.

"The kind of bonding experiences gained here can have a lasting effect," Mr. Stockman said. "When your child catches a fish for the first time and you are there, that smile can make a life-long memory."

The Web site for Family Resources is www.familyresourcesofpa.org. Click on "comprehensive campaign" for more information on the fund-raising efforts to benefit the retreat center.

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