

Fisher: After eight years, \$12 milion, Sobrato House ready for tenants

A HAVEN OPENS DOWNTOWN FOR VALLEY'S DISPLACED YOUNG PEOPLE

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Monica Simons, a case manager for the Sobrato House, a new shelter... (Richard Koci Hernandez)

The first time I saw the Sobrato House Youth Center, it didn't have a name. It was little more than a dream and a bunch of architectural drawings spread out on a table. The idea was for San Jose's homeless young people to have a refuge where they could find a hot meal, a temporary home and caring adults to help them find jobs, a place to live and hope.

That was more than five years ago. Today, the \$12.8 million center at South Third and William streets is open. Those drawings I saw - of a restored Victorian house alongside a new, two-story building surrounding a central courtyard - have come to life.

About half the cost of the building came from the San Jose Redevelopment Agency and the rest through other public and private contributions. John Sobrato, a local developer, provided \$1.25 million in grants and loans, which is why his name's on the door.

Thursday, the Sobrato House will have its grand opening. It will be run by EHC LifeBuilders, which has had its share of problems the past year and recently restructured. So for EHC, it's nice to have something to celebrate.

At the opening ceremony, dignitaries will gather to congratulate one another, nibble hors d'oeuvres and tour the place. And then they'll clear out so the young people can have it to themselves.

It's estimated there are about 2,000 homeless youths in Santa Clara County, but they are an invisible population. Runaways who camp on their friends' couches, kids whose families are homeless or who have been thrown out. Some have drug or alcohol problems or mental health issues. Some have been in trouble with the law.

Since 1990, EHC LifeBuilders, which was then known as Emergency Housing Consortium, has been reaching out to our homeless kids. In 1993 it opened a drop-in center and emergency shelter called Our House and later offered apartments to homeless young people while they finished school and saved up for a place of their own.

Over the years, EHC reached out to thousands of kids. Kids like Selina Gimbal. Her family was homeless in 2005 when a counselor at her high school told her about Our House.

"I'd been pretty down and out," she told me the other day. The folks at EHC helped her get a job and offered her an apartment, rent free, as long as she put 30 percent of her income into a savings account. They taught her to cook and manage her money.

"I was never lonely there because there was always something going on."

When she moved out the following year, Gimbal had saved \$5,000. Today she has her own apartment, works for an equipment-leasing company and goes to college full time.

For a while, Our House itself was in danger of becoming homeless.

The building



it occupied on South Fifth Street was right in the middle of the site for the new San Jose City Hall. A temporary building was found across the street, but Our House needed a permanent home. EHC saw an opportunity to consolidate its services - the drop-in center, emergency beds for homeless youths and transitional housing apartments - under one roof. Others proposed adding apartments for City Year volunteers, who come here to provide community service and live on very small stipends.

Eventually the site on Third and William was chosen. After 19 sometimes contentious community meetings, the project got city approval, but only after EHC agreed to create a community advisory board to monitor any problems the kids might create in the neighborhood.

Director Michelle Covert, who's been with the center since 1992, was busy unpacking boxes and getting beds made when I stopped by Monday. A couple of the nine apartments are occupied and there's a long waiting list for the rest. Later this year the City Year workers will be moving into the five other apartments. The 10 emergency shelter beds will open as soon as EHC's license comes through.

It took eight years, \$12 million and the commitment of hundreds of people to build Sobrato House. Now it's going to take \$250,000 a year to run it, money that EHC still needs to raise.

So when the donors, fundraisers and politicians have finished admiring the building and enjoying themselves on Thursday, their work still won't be finished. Nor will ours. Keeping the welcome mat out at the Sobrato House Youth Center is going to be a long-term job for all of us.