

Burlington County Times

Nonprofit MEND celebrates providing affordable housing for 50 years

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Matthew Reilly, president and CEO of MEND, outside of the completed Duffy School apartments.

The modest effort started by nine Moorestown churches on Beech Street in 1969 has led to the development of affordable housing for over 1,300 of South Jersey's low- to moderate-income residents.

MOORESTOWN — One year before New Jersey Supreme Court's landmark ruling that all municipalities must provide affordable housing, representatives from nine churches in Moorestown recognized the need and pooled their resources together to begin construction on an 18-unit affordable housing complex along Beech Street.

Five decades later, the effort started by those congregations has led to the development of housing for over 1,300 of South Jersey residents in need of safe, decent and affordable places to live.

The Moorestown Ecumenical Neighborhood Development (MEND) is celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2019, a testament to the foresight of the faith-based organization's founders that every person deserves the chance to live in a home they can afford, no matter their income.

“This is a very big deal for us,” said MEND President and CEO Matthew Reilly. “For MEND and our founding churches to start in 1969 in Moorestown — not in an impacted urban area, but Moorestown — and just say we need to create some housing in this community so that people who can't afford to live in the market-rate housing can still live here so we can have a diverse community ... is really an amazing accomplishment.”

MEND was founded in 1969 by Boyce M. Adams along with C. Dixon Heyer, Clarence L. Baylor, G.S. Spohn, Warren D. Sawyer, Rev. Fred D. Tennie, Jr., Steward R. Maines and now-retired Superior Court Assignment Judge Harold B. Wells, III, before he was named to the Burlington County bench.

The nonprofit has never strayed far from its original vision and now works to develop, build, manage and maintain housing for low-to-moderate income families, seniors and those with special needs.

In its early days, the organization focused on developing affordable housing solely in Moorestown. From 1969 to the 2000s, it developed nearly 250 affordable housing units across 20 locations throughout the township.

However, when Reilly signed on to lead the nonprofit in 2001, he said, it was struggling financially.

Reilly, who had previously worked for the nonprofit affordable housing developer New Community Corporation in Newark and in commercial real estate lending, wanted to find a way to expand the organization's portfolio.

The solutions — use the federal Low Income Tax Credit Program to finance more projects and expand MEND's portfolio to other towns, and form a pioneering joint venture agreement with the for-profit developer Conifer Realty — allowed MEND to develop projects on a larger scale.

“Conifer had larger financial role, and larger ownership, but MEND had meaningful ownership, meaningful control and a meaningful share in the fees that are generated by

those projects. That I believe enabled the organization to kick start a new part of its life,” Reilly said.

Since then, MEND has not just developed 770 units across 30 locations throughout Burlington, Gloucester and Atlantic counties, but in the process it has preserved a number of historical buildings by repurposing them into residential complexes — a practice that was in place since its beginning.

MEND has repurposed the old Moorestown Fire Department Hose Company No. 1 building; the former Lenola Elementary School in Moorestown; the old Mitchell School at Springside in Burlington Township; and the 100-year-old Marcella Duffy School in Florence.

“A town being able to take one of these old buildings, save them and repurpose it to make a new contribution to the town, towns generally are really excited about it,” Reilly said.

The Marcella Duffy School is a special place for Melva Gilanyi. It was where she and her late husband graduated from high school in 1949, and where she would call home 46 years later.

“It’s brought good memories back,” Gilanyi said, who moved into MEND’s Duffy Apartments when they opened in 2015. “I’m happy here, it’s a beautiful place. Everybody is nice here, and it’s like a little community.”

MEND has also developed a 104-unit affordable housing complex in Evesham, a development for the elderly and disabled in Medford, along with other projects in Delanco, Deptford and Egg Harbor City. This year it broke ground on its newest project, a 54-unit affordable housing project for seniors at the former site of the Cinnaminson Home in Cinnaminson.

“We’ve been able to expand the mission and help more people, and it’s not easy for nonprofit housing development organizations to not only survive but to stay true to our mission and thrive,” Reilly said. “We’ve been able to do that.”

Gloria Titus, a resident of MEND’s Medford Senior Residence for nine years, moved there after a friend of her mother’s who had lived in another MEND development had praised the organization.

“I knew MEND had a good name behind it,” Titus said. “It’s been wonderful, and I couldn’t ask for a nicer place. It’s small, and you get to know everybody and you make good friends.”

In his time as president and CEO, Reilly has also formed the Friends of MEND — a group of professionals dedicated to fundraising and promoting the nonprofit organization.

“We have a responsibility to make sure people know about MEND and affordable housing and bring awareness to the issue,” said Friends of MEND member Daniel Caldwell, of Stout & Caldwell Engineers.

Caldwell has been a part of the Friends of MEND since its inception around 15 years ago.

“It’s an award-winning organization,” Caldwell said. “It’s a true need in our society, we need affordable housing for everyone. (MEND) is a perfect storm of all the right things: need and leadership that cares and loves what they do.”

Since its start, MEND has earned eight regional and national awards for its projects. Reilly said the key for the nonprofit’s success has been “the steadfast support of our founding churches.”

“The churches have helped maintain the moral compass of the organization,” Reilly said.

He added that as long as it sticks to what has kept it around for 50 years, MEND will continue to provide housing that is very much needed across the state.

“We’ve helped the towns where we are fulfill their obligations to produce and have some affordable housing, and we’ve helped the people in those towns and in the surrounding areas to have the housing that they need. And very unfortunately, the need for the housing that we provide is not diminishing, its growing,” Reilly said.



Former Evesham Township Mayor Randy Brown walks down Wonona Trail in MEND's Sharp Run Family Housing development in Evesham prior to a ribbon cutting ceremony in 2009.



Matthew A. Reilly, president and CEO of MEND, Mayor Craig Wilkie and NJ Assemblyman Troy Singleton gather at the groundbreaking of the Marcella L. Duffy School Apartments in 2014.



Officials celebrate the grand opening of the restored, renovated and repurposed Duffy School in 2015.



Matthew Reilly, president and CEO of MEND, Inc., speaks during a groundbreaking ceremony for senior housing in Medford in 2009.