

Athena House addiction recovery home, once endangered, completes its comeback in Santa Rosa

After Athena House was threatened with closure, prominent local developers Cindy and Bill Gallaher purchased a Rincon Valley property for \$2.1 million, and have spent an additional \$6 million renovating it so the home's mission can continue.



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Liana Mills, right, and Chelsea Blosser, both current clients of Athena House and Hope Village, listen to speakers during an open house in Santa Rosa, Thursday, June 27, 2024. (Christopher Chung / The Press Democrat)

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Who doesn't love a comeback story?

Some 200 people braved a very warm Thursday afternoon to stroll the grounds of Athena House and Hope Village in Rincon Valley. They admired the gleaming, renovated buildings, plush landscaping and, at the midpoint of this resort-like campus, a brand new pickleball court.

Athena House, formerly located in the landmark Stone House on Sonoma Highway, is a 35-year-old low-cost residential housing program for women struggling with substance abuse. After

completing their drug treatment, alumni often graduated to transitional housing at its “sister” sober-living facility Hope Village — located at the site of Thursday’s festivities.

Two years ago, both facilities [found themselves in extremis](#) after the parent company of Athena House announced its intent to shutter the program.

\$8 million upgrade

That outcome was averted thanks to the eleventh-hour intercession of Cindy and Bill Gallaher, the prominent local developers who purchased the Rincon Valley property for \$2.1 million, and have spent an additional \$6 million renovating it.

The transplanted Athena House has been open for 10 months, managed along with Hope Village by [Buckelew Programs](#), a Marin County-based provider of mental health and addiction services. The campus remained a work-in-progress until Thursday’s Open House celebrated the project’s completion.

Partly obscured behind a large cluster of balloons, Cindy Gallaher kept her remarks brief, and to the point.

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“The way this place looks now,” she said, “reflects what the women who go through this program deserve.”

The couple was on vacation in Hawaii in 2022 when they learned of the imminent displacement of some 40 vulnerable women in various stages of recovery.

“Cindy looked at me and said, ‘We can help these women,’” Bill Gallaher recalled Thursday, while standing in the facility’s tony fitness center, which features cardio equipment, dumbbells, and an adjoining yoga room.

Upon visiting the property they’d purchased, the Gallahers quickly realized the project would entail far more than a “quick cosmetic upgrade.”

The subsequent, two-year construction project called for the remodeling of six structures, along with the razing and new construction of two homes. Amenities include a tetherball court and pickleball court, plus a playground.

Why a playground? Just east of Athena House, which holds 14 adults, mothers with young children can stay in the stand-alone Peri House. The main house of Hope Village, where women in transition can stay up to a year, is a 10-bedroom home with space for 20 women. Just south is the five-bedroom Mommy & Me house, designed, as the name suggests, for mothers and young children.



Athena House alumni Tracy Simmons pushes her son, Jackson, on the new playground at the Athena House and Hope Village open house in Santa Rosa on Thursday, June 27, 2024. (Christopher Chung/The Press Democrat)

Shortage of treatment beds

The facility fills a dire need in Sonoma County, which suffers from an acute shortage of treatment beds. Said Buckelew CEO Chris Kughn, “We’re still sending folks to Hilltop [Recovery Services] in Lake County because there’s not enough beds here. And we’re sending people to Helen Vine [Detox Center] in San Rafael to get detox treatment.”

Kughn added that “we are aiming” to open the “Buckelew Orenda Detox” center on September 1. Women who complete detox at that facility, to be located on Neotomas Avenue in Santa Rosa, can then transition to Athena House “if they meet the criteria for residential treatment.”

Early in the renovation of the Rincon Valley campus, working with Healdsburg-based Realtor Brooke Igleheart-Ross and longtime Athena House program director Sylvie De La Cruz, “We learned a whole lot about addiction, substance abuse and recovery,” recounted Cindy Gallaher.

Igleheart and De La Cruz, both Athena House alumna, “totally changed the way we felt about that whole process.

“We’re just so happy be able provide this setting for women that are doing the work they need to do.”

The pace of construction and renovation proceeded swiftly, as might be expected when the benefactors' holdings include [a large construction company](#).

Cindy also thanked Gallaher employees who pitched in on the project, and subcontractors who did work at bargain prices “because we all believe this is something the community needs to support.”

Recalling the day she'd seen Bill and Cindy planting vegetables in the facility's community garden, De La Cruz presented them with a tasteful, decorative sign, to be hung in that same garden. Its message: “Gallaher's Garden of Hope.”

When it appeared that Athena House and Hope Village were doomed, that their services would no longer be available to women in the community, despite the scourge of fentanyl in Sonoma County, “it was really devastating,” said De La Cruz.

To have the programs rescued, then renovated to the standard they are now “is really a miracle story.”



Tailor Silva, left, with her children Damon and Ariah, and Teresa Rea, tour a bedroom at Athena House and Hope Village in Santa Rosa on Thursday, June 27, 2024. Silva and Rea are both alumni of Athena House. (Christopher Chung/The Press Democrat)



A year after being shut down, Santa Rosa treatment center for women reopens



'We are eternally grateful': Santa Rosa treatment facility for women finds new home



'Lifesaving' Santa Rosa residential treatment program for women to close after 33 years

Among those in the audience applauding were Santa Rosa Mayor Natalie Rogers, along with council members Dianna MacDonald, Mark Stapp of Santa Rosa and Janice Cader Thompson of Petaluma. Close by were Supervisor-elect Rebecca Hermosillo, Assistant District Attorney Brian Staebell and Santa Rosa police chief John Cregan.

At times, the festive atmosphere belied the profoundly serious nature of the work that goes on here.

"It's life or death for us when we arrive here," said Natalee Simon. When she checked into Athena House in 2017, "it was the last stop on a very long road" of addiction. "It was either going to save my life, or that was going to be it."

When she walked through the doors of Stone House, Simon recalled, "something in me shifted. There was something about the energy there. All the girls used to say there was magic in the walls."

She left "a changed person," and enrolled in nursing school. Sober seven years now, she's a licensed, registered nurse at a hospital.

"I continue to use the tools I learned at Athena House. I just feel so indebted to this place," said Simon, who was deeply upset when it looked like the program might disappear.