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Quarters C on the old Navy base has been renovated by the South Carolina STRONG residential education program that seeks to help ex-convicts and former substance abusers turn their lives around.

‘Labor of love’ gives ex-convicts fresh start

Mansion makeover lets group expand at old Navy base

BY GLENN SMITH
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A historic home on the former Navy base that once served as a commander’s quarters soon will house former prison inmates looking to turn their lives around.

The addition of Quarters C will allow South Carolina STRONG, a residential education program for ex-convicts and former substance abusers, to expand from 28 to 65 people. The nonprofit organization, which opened in May 2006, occupies two other buildings on the former base as well.

The 5,084-square-foot Colonial Revival mansion known as Quarters C was completed in 1908 and served as a base commander’s residence, according to the National Register of Historic Places.

The two-story home had fallen into serious disrepair and residents of S.C. STRONG spent the last few years doing extensive renovations with the aid of about \$200,000 worth of donations from a variety of community organizations, facility manager Carol Kizziah said.

“All the residents here are looking to change their lives,” she said. “So this is physically symbolic as we have also changed the neighborhood for the better.”

John Tecklenburg, a commercial real estate agent who serves as president of S.C. STRONG’s board of directors, said the “bones of the house” were in good shape, but the porch needed total rehab, and the interior required major electrical, plumbing and mechanical work, as well as a new kitchen and bathrooms, he said.

“It’s been a labor of love and they’ve done an incredible job,” he said. “The concept of this whole program is to be self-sustaining, and part of that means the residents learn job skills and training that helps supports the organization itself and helps support them when they graduate.”

S.C. STRONG replicates the Delancey Street Foundation program, which started in San Francisco in 1971 and reportedly has helped more than 18,000 people turn their lives around. It requires a minimum two-year commitment and focuses on training residents in construction, catering, landscaping and furniture restoration. Trident Literacy Association also helps residents attain at least a high school equivalency diploma before graduating.

The program has graduated 30 people so far and has about a 90 percent employment rate, Kizziah said. Only one graduate has been arrested for a felony offense, she said. “There’s been very little recidivism,” she said.

North Charleston Mayor Keith Summey said the program has brought only positives to the old base. He said the renovation project proves the program “can be successful for them and be successful for the people who have given them a chance as well.”

In addition to housing for participants, Quarters C has ample space downstairs that could be used to host

gatherings and special events that can be catered in-house, Tecklenburg said.

Quarters C had been owned by the Noisette Co., whose fading plans to redevelop the former Navy base came to an end last week with a \$10 million land purchase by South Carolina's railway division.

An agreement with the state will place the building's deed in the city of North Charleston's hands, along with the two other buildings occupied by S.C. STRONG.

Summey said the city hasn't determined a leasing arrangement, which could involve a nominal rent or perhaps a trade-off for use of the program's skilled labor to make other improvements.

“All the residents here are looking to change their lives.”

**Carol Kizziah,
Facility Manager**

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