

THE RIVERTOWNS Enterprise

The Hometown Newspaper
of Hastings-on-Hudson,
Dobbs Ferry, Ardsley
and Irvington

VOLUME 43, NUMBER 7 • MAY 18, 2018

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Keith Haring Medical Clinic brightens Children's Village

By Kris DiLorenzo

Children's Village celebrated the official opening of its renovated medical clinic, now called the Keith Haring Medical Clinic, this past Tuesday, May 15. The name honors the internationally renowned artist who volunteered as a mentor at the Children's Village (CV) periodically from 1982 until his death in 1990, at age 31, from AIDS-related complications.

The clinic is unique in that its walls are covered with Haring's primary-colored acrylic painted murals depicting his signature "radiant" children and adults, cavorting joyfully. Reproductions of Haring's individual paintings are also hung on the walls throughout the building.

He first painted a mural for CV in June of 1985, on the walls of the former Ecker Hall, which was torn down in 1994 to make way for the original medical clinic, opened in 1995. That mural was preserved and relocated to the clinic lobby.

Haring first painted the prototypes of his distinctive figures circa 1980 as (illegal) black or white outlines on New York's subway walls. They drew public attention, and launched him into the top echelon of the city's art scene as he shed the label of "graffiti artist."

In 1989, Haring established the Manhattan-based Keith Haring Foundation to provide financial support for nonprofit organizations focusing on vulnerable children and HIV/AIDS-related work.

"The Foundation has donated \$1.3 million over the course of many years for the clinic and the Keith Haring Art Program," CV's senior communications officer for advancement, Stephanie Hinkaty, said. The arts program was established in 1994.

CV paid tribute to the artist in 2008, declaring the first Keith Haring Day and hosting celebratory and creative activities on the campus.

The Foundation gave CV \$400,000 for the clinic's renovation. CV's medical director, Dr. Douglas Waite, who has worked part-time at the clinic since 2003, explained the overall concept of the renovation: "We worked to figure out the flow, reconfigured the clinic, and made everything easily accessible."

Architect Samir Shah of Brooklyn-based Urban Quotient Architecture had the building gutted



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Eahquan, a CV resident, and Julia Gruen, the executive director of the Keith Haring Foundation, cut the ribbon to the medical clinic.



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Julia Gruen talks with artist Louise Hunnicutt and Dr. Douglas White, the medical director of the clinic.

to create open space with more glass, admitting more natural light. The nurses' station was enlarged, bathroom floors re-tiled, and the number of exam rooms increased from two to four. New exam tables, desks, refrigerators for vaccines, two rooms for psychiatric evalu-

ation, new plumbing, wiring for computers, TVs in the six-bed infirmary for overnight patients, new duct work for the air conditioners, and a bright new waiting room with a TV were added. One unusual feature: using a computer program, second-language speak-

ers now can call up any language and Skype with an interpreter.

The "flow" idea is also applicable to another aspect of the clinic.

"We want to provide comprehensive care," Waite stated. "Disjointed care, rather than continuous care, is usual for fostered students, and a lot of the kids have been through very bad experiences with asthma and PTSD. Foster care is fractured care. Now we can integrate medical and psychiatric care."

At the ribbon-cutting ceremony that followed a facility tour, CV president and CEO Jeremy Kohomban told listeners, "We want to celebrate not only the reconstruction of this clinic but also its message. It's not just medical, it's a place that welcomes young people not just to come when they need it, but also to prevent problems."

He talked about access to quality healthcare and the hope that the clinic will help CV residents learn how to be healthy for the long term, concluding, "The belief we have is that when things are beautiful around our kids and families, beautiful things happen."

The Foundation's executive director, Julia Gruen, who was Haring's studio manager from 1984 to 1990 and occasionally accompanied him to CV, also spoke. "What we do here is spectacular," she announced. Gruen noted that she had been impressed by Haring's ability to connect and have fun with the children, and complimented Louise Hunnicutt, a Brooklyn-based artist who touched up any damage to the artwork.

Gruen then read a statement by the artist about why he sought projects with young people:

"Working with kids is something that I get into more and more; it's one of the most satisfying things I do. What I like about children is their imagination. It's a combination of the honesty and freedom they seem to have in expressing whatever is on their minds, and that they have a really sophisticated sense of humor. Children have incredible instincts which get them through the world."

Eahquan, an 18-year-old CV resident, summed up the Keith Haring Medical Clinic's importance for him. "Every time I have a toothache, I come here. They give me something that works. If you need to be seen, they'll see you. They never say 'no.'"