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Emmanuel College has lofty mission at quiet Roxbury site

Serving others is goal at campus

By **Matt Rocheleau**

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2 COMMENTS



JOANNE RATHE/GLOBE STAFF

Akyanna Smith found a place to study on Emmanuel College's new Notre Dame campus. The Roxbury site was once a convent.

Boston's newest college campus, which opened this month, features a trove of tranquil hideaways — a reading room, an ornate chapel, a spacious, leafy backyard bordered by a grand puddingstone cliff. And the site boasts breathtaking views of the city's skyline.

But students living on this hilltop oasis in Roxbury say they were drawn to Emmanuel College's fledgling Notre Dame campus by a loftier reason: to serve others.

“What really brought me here is to have an opportunity to work with the neighbors and become a part of this new community,” said Akyanna Smith, an Emmanuel senior who is the campus resident assistant. She is one of about 25 students who are living at the site, formerly the Society of St. Margaret's convent.

“It's one thing to learn about service and it's another to be in the trenches doing the work,” she added. “It makes you a well-

rounded person. I feel more disciplined and I feel good about giving back.”

Students at the Notre Dame campus must complete four hours of community service each week, in addition to their schoolwork. They do not receive pay or credits for their service. The group will also meet monthly to share stories and reflect on the volunteer work.

“It’s important for students to be asking themselves bigger questions,” said Deirdre Bradley-Turner, director of community service and service learning.

The 1½-acre campus atop Fort Hill, less than 2 miles from the Catholic liberal arts college’s home campus in the Fenway, has ample quiet space for students.

The main four-story, 35,700-square-foot facility features a series of serene common spaces, including a lounge, reading room, an old telephone room, and multiple meeting and conference rooms, one of which is home to a large working pipe organ. The campus also features a chapel with several rows of pews, an altar, stained glass, and statues.

The top floor, lined by window seats and a sizeable balcony, offers spectacular views of Boston.

“The buildings on our main campus are filled to the max and bursting at the seams,” said John S. Byrne, associate director of residence life and housing. “We really don’t have the luxury of these great open, quiet spaces.”

In her first two weeks living there, senior Gina Tremaglio said she has used the property’s silent spots to catch up on studying and homework or to simply relax in the backyard gazebo.

“I enjoyed dorm life, but naturally it’s noisier and there’s a lot of hustle and bustle, people going in and out and slamming doors, playing loud music,” said the 21-year-old from Southington, Conn. “It’s so peaceful here.”

The college spent nine months and just over \$1 million renovating the property. The majority of the project involved upgrading utilities.

No work was done to the oldest section of the building which was once home to the famed abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. The two-story Greek Revival structure, which dates to the 1840s, became a national historic landmark in 1966.

Little work was needed to convert a series of modest rooms into dormitories on the second and third floors.

Those rooms were once used to treat patients. In the late 19th century, the Sisters of St. Margaret established a nursing home for poor African-American women. Two decades ago, the Episcopal nuns themselves moved to the property.

In order to devote more resources to a mission they run in Haiti, the nuns recently relocated convent operations to a less-expensive site in Duxbury after they agreed two years ago to sell the Roxbury complex to Emmanuel for \$3 million.

Others had eyed the property. Proposals — including to convert the site into a charter school, condos, even a dormitory for another university — drew objections from neighbors.

Eventually, Emmanuel officials toured the site and decided to buy. The college's treasurer, Sister Anne Mary Donovan, said the school's decision was "completely serendipitous."

"There are so many features of this property that are intriguing," Donovan said. "It's a new adventure for us."

Administrators said the college may use the property to host conferences, retreats, and other events during summer or at other times when students are not around.

College officials do not expect students will disrupt that tranquility or otherwise clash with abutting residents. Alcohol and smoking are banned. The small group of juniors and seniors living there have been screened to ensure they do not have a disciplinary record.

Fort Hill residents said the Emmanuel students' arrival has been "painless."

"Initially, folks were a little apprehensive," said Rodney Singleton, who has lived several blocks from the property for more than a decade. "But it looks like they are very level-headed students. Their mission is really somewhat constructive — the idea of community engagement, uplifting the neighborhood. Those are all pluses."

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