

September 21, 2008

Artists find inspiration in old Norwalk mansion

By **ABBY LUBY**
Special correspondent

For centuries, churches have been art patrons.

From Michelangelo's ceiling in the Sistine Chapel to Leonardo da Vinci's "Last Supper" in the refectory of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan, artists have been drawn to the church and other religious communities that appreciate their work.

So when Norwalk's St. Philip Church offered up the old Manis Lockwood family mansion on its France Street property as a new art center, it seemed to be a good fit -- for the clergy and artists.



Dave Morico - *Blu Sound*

"I was becoming very unhappy to see the building empty -- it had been occupied for some 25 years by a rehabilitation group helping troubled teens," explains the Rev. Michael Boccaccio, pastor at St. Philip's for 20 years. "Since they moved off campus in 2000, we have been looking for another resident organization, but haven't been very successful.

"One day I saw (artist) David Morico in the church parking lot moving some of his paintings into the basement of the mansion, which is a huge space. I thought, 'This is a good way to use the building.' "

Converting the five spacious bedrooms of the 100-year-old mansion into artists' studios under the banner of the Saint Philip Artists Guild seemed to work for everyone. SPAG will host its first open studios event this weekend.

Morico, who grew up in New Haven, had been living in Norwalk for 10 years, working out of a small home studio. About 18 months ago, when he was offered one of the rooms at the mansion for his studio, he was thrilled.

"When this opportunity came up, it was amazing. I was going from a closet-size space at home to a space with 18-foot ceilings and windows from floor to ceiling. Working in that space brought great energy to my work."

Meanwhile, artist Duvian Montoya says when he was contemplating returning to

Norwalk from New Mexico about two years ago, he heard from relatives about SPAG. Before he made the trek home, he talked to Boccaccio.

"He told me if I was coming back I could take a space in the mansion and use it as an artist's studio. The offer made my decision to come back home easier -- it was comforting to know there was a space where I could paint."



Duvian Montoya - *Our Cooks*

Like Morico, Montoya says he found motivation in the new studio space and produced a body of paintings about immigrant workers.

Other artists working in the mansion's studios are Frank Ciappetta, the church's deacon, who creates religious icons; Steve Bagnell, who is the church administrator; and Ralph DiMarco.

When not creating art, the guild members offer Boccaccio a helping hand around the place.

"Having the artists help in the restoration and the general cleanup is their way of reciprocating and serving the parish," says Boccaccio. "It's a good way to use the building and the by-product is getting help restoring the building."



Tom Rielly - *South Norwalk Variety*

The artists also help decorate the church interior on holidays.

Although the guild is open to all artists, Boccaccio says his preference is to invite others who would be willing to become involved in the parish.

Boccaccio has many more ideas about art in the mansion.

"Down the line, it would be good to establish a little artist guild school for those interested in learning the arts."

Next weekend's "Grand Unveiling" will showcase the work of the resident artists, as well as local painters Gary Recchia, Paul Favello and Tom Reilly, who are not SPAG members..



Ralph DiMarco - *Untitled*

"Now that this event is going on, it's bringing the artists together," says Morico. "It's nice to come in the evening and see the artists working, preparing for the show."

Montoya says the work in the show will mainly consist of paintings depicting landscapes, colorful abstractions, portraiture, religious icons and social issues.

Saint Philip Artists Guild will host its "Grand Unveiling" Friday through Sunday. An artists' reception is planned for Friday, 6 to 9 p.m.; open studio hours are Saturday noon to 7 p.m. and Sunday 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. SPAG is at 23 France St., Norwalk. For more information, call (505) 400-4467 or e-mail duvianm@duvianmontoya.com.