Webers: 'There was thousands and thousands of pounds of garbage'

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Noel Weber Jr. purchased the former YMCA in 2015 from local artist Jim Russell. He heard about the building while on the way to Blue Scorcher with his sister, Anna Weber, who had recently started the Astoria Design Studio sign company with her husband, Sam Liberto. The family, who run Classic Design Studio with their father, Noel Weber Sr., imagined an Astoria expansion of the artistic cooperative they had built in Boise.

"It's been a really fun family project that has involved the community of Astoria and a lot of friends," Noel Weber Jr. said. "That's the real value."

Built in 1914

The YMCA building, built in 1914, includes about 14,000 square feet split over three stories, including a former dorm hall upstairs, suites on the ground floor, a bright white former basketball gym on 12th Street and a basement swimming pool. The building sits next to the former Overbay Auto Museum, where a group of friends recently opened the Rope Room recording studio.

In the late 1980s, the YMCA closed. The building was converted to the private New Beginnings Christian School. The new owners changed windows, painted the building purple, scrapped the former floor plan and boarded over the basement swimming pool.

After Noel Weber Jr. bought the building, the family gathered historical photos and designs and went to work planning the restoration. They started chipping away at the utilities inside and emptying out the detritus.

"There was thousands and thousands of pounds of garbage," Anna Weber said.

Much of the work has been funded by sweat equity, Noel Weber Jr. said. He and his wife, Dutch photographer Wytske van Keulen, split about 70% of their time in Boise and 30% in Astoria working on the YMCA with Anna Weber, Liberto and friends.

The project received a shot in the arm in 2017 with a $20,000 grant from the Oregon State Historic Preservation Office's Diamonds in the Rough program. The family used it to restore and reproduce several architectural elements along the 105-year-old facade, including an iron railing above the 12th Street entrance; the symbolic iron equilateral triangle representing the YMCA's focus on mind, spirit and body; new upstairs windows; and various molding, casting and reproductions of lintel details.

Last year, Noel Weber Sr. held a gold leaf lettering workshop at the YMCA, drawing artists to Astoria from as far away as Israel, when someone randomly offered to set up scaffolding outside the building. The offer allowed the family and friends to work their way in several spurts throughout last summer along the facade, turning the faded purple of the former school into a fresh coat of gray and black.

Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Noel Weber Jr. uses a power sander to smooth the hardwood floors in a front room facing Exchange Street.

The Webers plan to restore the 1914 building and maintain its historic roots.

New life

With the facade mostly complete, the family has been readying the building for several new tenants moving in early next year.

Nick Wheeler, who runs Wheeler Bag Co., and Becky Tonkin, owner of local clothing line Shift, will take over a small suite on the eastern side of the building. Andy Eddy and Sarah Woods will turn the corner suite on 12th and Exchange streets into the locally focused Gathered Bakeshop and Market.

Woods and Eddy, who met in Astoria, run Gathered Confections in Bellingham, Washington. They will soon move south and start building out a kitchen in the YMCA. Woods will focus on her pastries, and Eddy a locavore market.

Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Wytske van Keulen fills the narrow gaps between panels of drywall with caulk in the front corner suite of the YMCA building.

"They've done a good job curating people who make things intentionally," Woods said of the Webers.

In September, printmaker Emily Geddes took up residency in the YMCA's gym, where the family has been turning a former basketball court into a coworking space for artists.

"It's just a really nice, productive, open group of people and space," Geddes said of the gym.

Geddes and fellow local artists Will Elias, Dave Coyne and Andrea Mazzarella recently received a $4,000 grant from the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art to install a letterpress for workshops, demonstrations and affordable access.

Noel Weber Jr. said family and friends will continue work on the building as time and money allow. They hope to install new windows and doors along the gym's frontage of 12th Street, further opening the YMCA to the public eye by the spring.

"Once we get the doors on the gym, that will be a little bit more of a community space," Noel Weber Jr. said. "But all these things take time for us, because they also take a lot of money, and our funds are definitely finite."

Van Keulen said the project has involved a lot of hard work from family and friends from Idaho and Tacoma, Washington. They stay upstairs in the YMCA's former dorm wing, which Noel Weber Jr. hopes to eventually turn into an apartment.

Anna Weber continues running her company, with signs on seemingly every block of downtown Astoria.

"I love working with my family on ridiculously huge projects," she said. "But also opening this building back up to be a community space is really important to all of us."

Freitag: Wants to offer workshops

Continued from Page A1

just seen a bunch of trees and flowers," she said. Now she appreciates a different level of complexity. The array of different grasses in a patch of habitat, not just the grand view.

This double sight remains, but recently she's shifted into a different type of work.

In mid-December, she took over ownership of Lodestar Goods, formerly Maiden Astoria, on 14th Street. The shop features goods by local and regional artists and makers.

Freitag, who has a background in both biology and art, first became familiar with the shop when she started selling her artwork and goods there on consignment after she moved to the area from Portland.

Freitag had never considered herself the entrepreneurial type, but she saw a lot of similarities between herself and Lodestar's former owner, Emily Geddes.

"Someone who is like me in a lot of ways does this, maybe I could do it too," she thought.

She also was tired of working wage jobs and the uncertainty and frequent time away from home that came with field work. The idea of running her own business grew on her, especially amid the support and encouragement she had found since moving to the area.

Freitag wants Lodestar Goods to be a creative resource for the community. She plans to emphasize the gallery space available in the shop more and hopes to eventually offer workshops. She will continue to carry wholesale items and work with many of the consignors who already sell through the shop.

"It's really fun to support people who are just doing something they care about," Freitag said about working with small businesses and consignors. "It feels very neighborly in a way."

Fire: 'We're focusing on what we have'

Continued from Page A1

husband in the living room. That's when she heard an unusual noise coming from outside.

"It was so windy and so rainy, I thought the roof had a leak or something," Kurrus said. "I could hear what I thought (was) water rushing in our lower living room and I went downstairs and I saw that the whole side of the house was on fire."

"When I looked outside, the fire was so angry," she said. "It was so angry already. I just thought, 'This isn't real.'"

Kurrus screamed "fire!" and ran to her two children, who were in the house. She woke up her daughter and they ran outside to their neighbor's house.

She said her husband ran toward the fire to see if he could put it out.

"He said he opened the back door and when he looked it was just this spinning vortex in the whole back of the house of fire, and it was so hot and so angry," Kurrus said.

She said her husband and son are merchant mariners and need special documents to go to work, so he ran to their bedroom to get his backpack with the documents. While he was there, Kurrus said the bedroom window blew out.

"I called 911," Kurrus said. "My husband wasn't coming out of the house and it was terrifying. He was trying to save the pets and get everybody out. He managed to grab the keys to our vehicles … and moved the vehicles."

He removed as many pets from the house as he could, but some went back inside.

Kurrus said they lost eight pets to the fire, including two cockatoos, four cats and two dogs.

They were able to save their dog, "Ladybug," a Maltese and Shih Tzu mix, but their East German shepherd, "Scout," and their yellow Lab and Golden Retriever mix, "Moses," ran back inside.

"I think they were trying to find us because they didn't know we were out," Kurrus said.

"We had minutes to get out of the house when we noticed the fire," she said. "And it literally was coming in the back door as we were running out the front door. And then by the time my husband got to the front door, it was already in the living room."

She said the American Red Cross provided blankets and essentials to get through the night. She said her children weren't even wearing shoes.

The family checked into the Holiday Inn Express and Suites in Astoria and plan to stay at the hotel until they can find a home to rent.

"The next day you have to pick yourself up, dust off and move forward," Kurrus said.

"We are thankful for everything that we have. We have so much, we really do. We have each other. Nobody got hurt, everyone's healthy. We have Ladybug still."

She said she is thankful for the community, her work family and the firefighters who responded to the fire.

"I know one of the firefighters got hurt and that also weighs heavy on my heart," Kurrus said.

"We're focusing on what we have and not what we lost. We have each other and we have an amazing community."

The cause of the fire is under investigation.

An account for the family has been opened at TLC Fibre Federal Credit Union. Donations can be made to the family at any of the credit union's locations.

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