

Family Atmosphere Keeps High-Rise Community Together

Ever enter one of those homes where you can immediately see the affection between family members by the constant, good-natured teasing? There is usually a clear message that while they can poke fun at each other, they will be back-to-back to deal with anyone outside the family who gives one of them a hard time.

Welcome to the Tamaqua High-Rise.

“We are like a little family up here,” says Affiliate Director Pat Stefanek, glancing over at Property Superintendent Tony Fannock. Resident Social Services/Office Assistant Director Deann Breiner and Maintenance staffer Lyman Meckes round out the group, which keeps the 40-year-old, 15-story building – the tallest in Tamaqua – operating as a community resource for the elderly, low income and physically disabled residents of Schuylkill County.

Pat jokes that Tony is a wannabe private detective who keeps an eye out on residents and townspeople alike, making sure no one is getting into trouble. Tony shoots back that “we have the Queen of the High-Rise, the Queen of Tamaqua” here.

Yet despite their gentle taunts, the genuine respect is palpable. Tony is quick to acknowledge the role Pat’s experience, skill and connections play and have played in ensuring the tower’s role as a stabilizing factor for those who need it, and Pat is just as emphatic about Tony’s ability to fix just about any system or piece of equipment in the building.

“He’s a great problem-solver,” she explains. “Even if it is something that he cannot fix, he’ll watch the repair people so he knows what they did and he learns how to do these things. He doesn’t miss a trick.”

The two of them are the veterans here. They have been working together since 1994 when the borough of Tamaqua took over ownership of the building, which was built in 1974 under

the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Section 23 program.

The building was operated by the Schuylkill County Housing Authority while the bonds that paid for its construction were paid. Once that occurred, it reverted to the borough – which really didn’t want to deal with it. Stefanek was on Borough Council at the time and became involved as the borough tried to sell it – a long and complicated process due to the federal funding and housing regulations governing its operations.

Both Stefanek and Fannock worked for Interstate Management Company, which managed the property until it was sold to the Alliance for Building Communities in 2001. ABC performed more than \$2 million in property improvements, including new elevators, boilers, air conditioning, waterproofing, kitchens, a community room, front and side patios and six new handicapped accessible apartments, Fannock said.

The high rise includes 117 apartments, including 84 one-bedroom, 1 two-bedroom and six efficiency units created to meet the mandates of the low income tax credits used to do the renovations, Stefanek said. “When the Alliance took over we had a whole new set of rules and we had 25 clients that didn’t meet them,” Stefanek explains. “So 17 are now market-rate apartments with no (federal rent) subsidies, but the majority of our tenants are Section 8 (a federal rent voucher program that allows eligible tenants to obtain housing assistance.)”



Pat Stefanek, Affiliate Director of ABC’s Tamaqua Highrise, speaks with resident Agnes Hydro (left) in a small garden outside the highrise that is maintained by the residents of Tamaqua’s tallest building.

Breiner is a newcomer who has been with the team for only about a year. She administers the monthly programs and activities for residents as well as elderly community members who also participate, issues a monthly newsletter to residents, assists tenants with paperwork or finding needed public services and transportation.

“I love my job,” she says. “We try to do things to keep our residents connected to the community and keep them active.”

The team is also responsible for Liberty Hall at 420 E. Broad St., a former factory that now houses 12 low income/senior apartments, and 401 Hazel St., a 14-unit building that ABC acquired in 2007.

For her part, Stefanek – a longtime political activist and former Tamaqua “Citizen of the Year” says she loves the work and the people.

“I like the job,” she says. “I could have retired long ago, but I like it. I like assisting people when they come in here.”