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New Era For Old Turner School

The school building that once served the African-American community has gone through a \$5 million renovation. An open house at the new J. Milton Turner Offices is set for Feb. 28, 3-6 p.m.

by Marty Harris

J. Milton Turner School has undergone a metamorphosis -- from a dilapidated, boarded-up school building to a modern office facility.

While the building at 1099 Milwaukee Street in Kirkwood's Meacham Park neighborhood now features the latest in office technology, evidence of the former school still exists. Rooms are bathed in light from the original windows. Hallways gleam with new tile floors, but old lockers, spruced up with a new coat of paint, still line the walls.

Walls also display the original gold-glazed tile wainscoting which now sparkles. An old school bulletin board will soon serve as the building's directory.

The transformation began in August 2004 when Webster Groves resident Steve Beck, president of Stocker Construction, and one of three partners to purchase Turner School, saw an article in the Webster-Kirkwood Times about the building being for sale. Other partners of J. Milton Turner Offices are Scott Krejci of Webster Groves, principal of Krejci Associates Architects; and Clayton Skaggs of Glendale, a chiropractor and director of Clayton Physical Medicine.

The boarded-up building was a sorry sight at the time of its sale.

"When I brought my partners through here for the first time I said, 'I think we could really do something with this building.' They kept shaking their heads and said, 'you've got to be kidding,'" Beck recalled.

His partners came around and Beck signed a contract that next week and closed the purchase in December 2004.

85 Percent Leased

Today, Beck and his partners are pleased with the results.

"We're 85 percent leased and we're not done (with construction) yet," Beck said. "We were running all our budgets that we might only be 80 percent leased for five years -- that we might never rent the whole space.

"I think we might be full in the next several months. We've got people looking at every space we still have available," he added.




The new gymnasium, a high-end, pro-athlete training facility, is called the Central Institute for Human Performance. The gym includes state-of-the-art training equipment and even a juice bar.
photo by Diana Linsley


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Among the occupants are the offices of Beck and his partners.

Partner Krejci said what attracted him to the building was walking in and seeing space -- "the final frontier" -- from the tall ceilings and windows.

He also noted that some of the finished are unique such as the glazed tile on the walls.

Krejci's offices are located in what was once the library. He designed the space retaining the glazed tiles and baring the concrete floors, finishing them with a sealant and wax finish. Shelves, which serve as partitions, are a reminder of the former library days.

Krejci's wife, Meg, said she can feel the vibrations from the former music room where she has opened Masterpeace Studio. The non-profit organization, features four studios for art, yoga creative movement, healing arts, and food and nutrition. The yoga studio is bright and welcoming with spruced-up glazed wall tiles and a new floor of light birch hardwood. Birch can be seen throughout both of the Krejcis' office space.

Like the rest of the building, the old gym has also undergone an amazing rejuvenation. From the new mezzanine addition, one can get a birds-eye view of gym, a high-end, pro-athlete training facility called the Central Institute for Human Performance.

Beck has partnered with Skaggs to open the gym which is training facility for the Blues, and other athletes such as Martin LaPoint of the Chicago Black Hawks. It also boasts as clients Joe Buck.

State-of-the-art training equipment and a juice bar sits on the old gym floor which has been waxed to a high shine, blemished only in a few places with water marks from the two skylights which once leaked.

Structurally, Krejci said the building was in good shape when the partners purchased it. All systems -- electrical, plumbing, mechanical -- had to be replaced. But the windows are the originals.

"They (previous owners) boarded up the windows which made it look unpleasant from the outside, but that really preserved the windows over time," Krejci said. "We took them out and refurbished them and put them back in."

A Major Undertaking

Beck admitted that renovating the school was more of an undertaking than he imagined.

He said the project is coming in at \$1.5 million over the original budget of \$3.8 million.

"It always cost more to take on an old building than you imagined when you started," Krejci said. He noted that without historic tax credits the project would not have been economically feasible.

Tax credits were available at 25 percent of construction costs from the state; 20 percent from the federal government.



Scott Krejci and Steve Beck, owners of J. Milton Turner Offices, stand in Krejci's new office space which was once the school's library. Clayton Skaggs is the third owner.
photo by Diana Linsley



A Turner School classroom photographed in 2004. The school was closed in the mid-1970s, and the Kirkwood School District sold the building in 1980.
photo by Diana Linsley

Tax credits were available since the the building had been listed on the National Register of Historic Places. To be eligible, certain historical aspects of the building, such as the exterior and hallways, had to remain.

"That's the key point," Krejci said. "If the city had not put the building on the National Register so that it was eligible for tax credit, it would have been lost."

Krejci said one reason the state provides the assistance is to foster economic development.

"This (Turner School) is truly an example of the economic development aspect of historic tax credits," Krejci said. He referred to his business which has doubled in size; the startup of his wife's business which was inspired by the space, plus other new businesses which are moving into the building.

Importance Of History

During the renovation process of Turner School, Krejci has come to realize the importance of the building to the neighborhood.

When the partners purchased the building, Krejci said the neighborhood wanted the school to be turned into a community center, but that project floundered.

"During that conversation, I really got how important the school is to them (residents) and the history of it. It transformed my view of the value of it for me to my role as a custodian of it," Krejci said.

He has since taken an active role in helping to preserve some of the building's history.

"We are going to create a historical display in the building," Krejci said. Many old photographs collected by Harry Ming have already been scanned into a computer. Krejci said he is working to put together a database of names associated with the pictures.

"The ultimate goal is to have a computer touch screen so visitors can come in, type in a class name and a picture will come up," Krejci said.

The display is expected to be on the first floor along the walls and in the rebuilt trophy case.

"You can't help but be moved by the idea that Blacks have been going to school here from the 1920s o the 1970s," he said.

Open House

The public is invited to tour the J. Milton Turner Offices on Tuesday, Feb. 28, from 3 to 6 p.m. A ribbon cutting will be held a 3 p.m. For more information, call Karen at 781-1300.



What was once a Turner School classroom has been converted into a reception area for Clayton Physical Medicine.
photo by Diana Linsley