

Giordano Diner rescued from Route 1 in Lawrence begins transformation into Isles classroom



Restoration work begins on the former Giordano Diner, which sat on Route 1 in Lawrence, by volunteers from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Cookie Acot discards rotted wood molding.

Nicole Mulvaney | Times of Trenton By **Nicole Mulvaney | Times of Trenton**

Follow on Twitter

on October 26, 2014 at 9:32 AM, updated October 26, 2014 at 9:34 AM

HAMILTON — Classic American diners have long been places hungry customers visited their favorite waitresses, enjoyed signature dishes and socialized with others while sitting at the restaurant's communal counter.

But when such a frequented eatery vanishes, "it creates a hole in the community," said Daniel Zilka, director of the American Diner Museum in Providence, Rhode Island.

"There's certain things you remember — coming in as a kid, sitting on the stools, spinning the stools, what you had for breakfast," Zilka said Wednesday while standing inside the former Giordano Diner as crews worked around him to clean up the space that will eventually serve as a classroom. "This is sort of the physical manifestation of memories, which are so important. That's why people preserve history. It's what they remember or what they like to remember."

In June, the diner that once sat on Route 1 in Lawrence was hauled to North Johnston Avenue in neighboring Hamilton after much speculation about its fate. It's sat abandoned for decades with its counter, some appliances and an exit sign still intact.

Zilka and a group of about 15 volunteers from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's investment division spent hours on Wednesday using hammers, shovels, brooms and other tools to clean up shards of glass, loose dirt and other debris that accumulated inside the diner over time.

Their work represents the first phase in repurposing the building and eventually transforming it into a working diner and classroom space for vocational training for Isles Inc.

Daniel Popkin, head of Hamilton-based Modern Recycled Spaces, and the Trenton-based Isles have been working to restore the diner and incorporate it into another project on the site of the abandoned Atlantic Products factory nearby. This "Mill One" project in Hamilton will revitalize the 300,000-square-foot factory and turn it into housing, artist's galleries and space for nonprofit organizations.

The diner is one of five in the state built by the Mountain View Diner Co. of Little Falls, which operated from 1939 to 1957. It was included on Preservation New Jersey's list of Top 10 most endangered sites in the state this year.

"There's only a certain amount of Mountain View diners. It's a limited resource, so every one that we have, we should save," Zilka said. "This sat empty for years and years and years, and if Isles didn't get involved, it would be in a landfill."

Brian O'Neil, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's chief investment officer, said the organization participates in a volunteer project annually and his coworkers Connie Acot and Warren Stock identified the diner project as a worthwhile undertaking.

"We researched local things, partly that were worthwhile for a cause and partly so we could actually spend time doing something together, and we found this," O'Neil said. "Our educational systems are failing us, so I think anything that can educate people in a way that will be effective is important."

Zilka, an architectural conservator and restoration specialist, said the crew has the original blueprints and will be using them to decide which pieces of the diner to scrap and preserve. The RWJF volunteers began hammering and peeling back wood paneling that was covering mint-and-cream-colored ceramic tiles that match those on the floor. The tiles and floor will all be saved in the restoration process.

Before donning white masks and gloves to work inside the diner, where rainwater dripped through the ceiling and moistened the floor, the crews learned about the history of American diners, Acot said.

"It was, to me, absolutely fascinating to learn how they started off as lunch carts, then lunch wagons, and then developed into an actual business," she said. "It's a great part of American history."

Isles **launched a fundraising website** seeking \$50,000 in donations to restore the diner. The estimated restoration cost will be about \$100,000, Isles director David Schrayer said.

So far, \$3,365 has been raised on the site, and the RWJF contributed \$25,000 — the single largest donation, he said.

Schrayer estimated restoration will progress over a few years and will be completed in stages as money comes in and different volunteer groups work on it, he said.

Despite the damp environment, Stock said his time Wednesday was well spent.

"Diners are really iconic in our state. To be able to get the ball rolling and allow Isles to get the momentum to get this thing fully renovated, it's really a great opportunity," he said.

*Nicole Mulvaney may be reached at **nmulvaney@njtimes.com**. Follow her on Twitter **@NicoleMulvaney**. Find **The Times of Trenton on Facebook**.*

© 2014 NJ.com. All rights reserved.