

Ernestine's opens new and improved shelter

Cynthia Reason, The Etobicoke Guardian

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One face will be notably absent from the grand reopening of Ernestine's Women's Shelter tomorrow – that of its namesake, the late Ernestine Van Marle.

Cindy Wagman, fundraising manager for the shelter, said while it's tragic van Marle didn't get to see the building project completed before her sudden death last June, she's sure the modest community crusader would have been delighted with its end result.

"Ernestine would have been so proud and so happy to see what a warm space had been created," Wagman said. "She just would have been thrilled that these services exist and to see the changes we had all longed for made."

Ernestine's Shelter now has a brand new and improved home, which has been open to clients since Jan. 15 and is expected to serve up to 50 more clients a year.

"Each family will have their own room, which is an exciting first for us," Wagman said. "We now have 32 beds in 14 bedrooms, whereas before we used to have 22 beds in six bedrooms, which means single families won't have to share rooms any more – we can offer a lot more privacy now."

In addition to increased privacy, the shelter's new environmentally friendly digs also boast to use 51 per cent less energy than current efficiency codes recommend, as well as offering up improved accessibility, enhanced services and better support to women and children escaping violence.

To serve a community with varying degrees of ability, the newly constructed Ernestine's Shelter has been fitted with wheel chair ramps, an elevator, accessible common rooms and bedrooms, and visual stimulus fire alarms and text telephones (TTYs) for the hearing impaired. Ernestine's staff has also undergone extra training on how to accommodate clients with special needs.

But of all the improvements made to the shelter, Wagman said the inclusion of a youth recreation areas is her favourite.

"There are so many great rooms here, but the youth room is the best," she said of the teen-designated area, complete with computer station, board games, gaming system stocked within non-violent video games, homework area and comfy couch. "For me, just remembering being a teenager and remembering what a difficult time it is anyway... you add that to the transition of being in a shelter and this room really lets the kids express themselves creatively." For more information on Ernestine's Women's Shelter, go to www.ernestines.ca.