

# Paint and Piety

**The mansion in the back of St. Philips in Norwalk has gone from private estate to convent to teen center to eyesore to now an artists guild**

By Wendy Logan

**S**t. Philip's Roman Catholic Church in Norwalk has made a pious offering to the local arts community of an historic, century-old mansion on church grounds. Having fallen into disrepair, the space had sat empty, save for one wing occupied by church Deacon Frank Chiappetta and his wife, for seven years.

It's now the home of the St. Philip Artists Guild (SPAG), the brain child of 20-year resident pastor and larger-than-life personality Father Michael Boccaccio, whose idea for a community art venue sprang from both his personal passion for the arts and some casual conversations with a few of his parishioners.

"It seemed a crime against architecture and culture for this beautiful space to be empty, to sit uninhabited," says Father B, as he is known to his flock. "I kept wondering what should be done with it and how we would be able to restore it to its old state." In an e-mail exchange with Duvian Montoya, 32 and a painter, it came to him. Cue the choir.

"Duvian's family have been parishioners here for decades," says Father B. "Duvian had been living in New Mexico for some time, was looking to come home, but was unsure about how to re-establish himself and concerned about how he would afford a studio space. Around the same time, artist and parishioner David Morico, who had been keeping his paintings in the back of a station wagon, asked me if he might store some of them in the mansion, and I thought, 'Look at that — David and now Duvian — there's something to consider here.'"

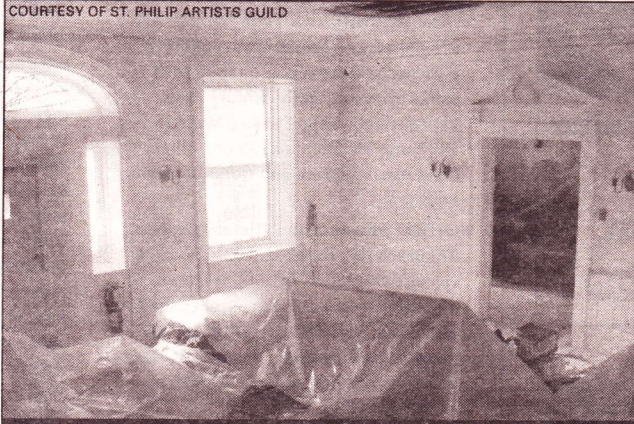
**"It seemed a crime  
against architecture and  
culture for this beautiful  
space to be empty,  
to sit uninhabited"**

**— Father Michael Boccaccio**

The passion for art extends far at St. Philips. Deacon Chiappetta is a painter, as is church administrator Steve Bagnell. Father B's own informal but dedicated ongoing study of art and how it traces church history is marked by annual trips to Italy.

He offered up of the mansion's rooms as art studios in exchange for a commitment from each artist to help restore the mansion, which holds a rich and storied history related to one of the City of Norwalk's most prominent names: Lockwood.





Each artist had to help restore part of the nearly century-old mansion

In 1784, a new farmhouse, to replace one burnt by the British, was built in the spot by Captain E. Lockwood, whose job as Assistant Commissary of Issue was to distribute food to American troops. The Lockwood Farm operated through the 18th and 19th centuries and was inherited in 1858 by Manice deForest Lockwood, Sr., who decided to build a grander house than the original, just behind it.

The current house was built between 1914 and 1916 by the cousin of LeGrand Lockwood, a banker-railroad tycoon who also had a hand in the building of the Lockwood Matthews Mansion Museum. Once the mansion was completed in 1916, the original farmhouse was broken up to make way for a large front yard.

In 1946, it fell out of the hands of the Lockwood family and sold to St. Mary's Church as housing for the nuns who taught at the Catholic schools it operated. Thus, the mansion was converted to a convent. As the school expanded, additional school buildings were constructed on the property, and in 1964, St. Philip's parish was established, taking over the entire property. Construction began on what still stands today as St. Philip Church. (It was actually built atop the foundation of the 18th century farmhouse that Manice deForest Lockwood, Sr., had cleared away.)

By the 1970s, lay people began to take over the teaching positions once occupied exclusively by nuns and priests. When just four nuns remained housed at the mansion in the mid-1970s, the unoccupied part of the building was rented to the Vitam Center, a facility for troubled teens, and through the nearly three decades that it served as student housing, the building fell into extreme disrepair, as woodwork and walls were damaged, firewalls built, and windows sealed shut.

By 1990, the three Catholic schools of Norwalk amalgamated into what is currently All Saints School on West Rocks Road, and by 2000, the Vitam Center closed.

(Montoya has spent many a late night working there alone and claims there may still be a few ghosts lurking. Some of the resident nuns died there and one can only imagine what went on at Vitam.)

The SPAG project was launched in March 2008. Montoya, Morico and Ralph Dimarco were the first artists on board and they began work on restorations with the assistance of Bagnell, who arranged for specialty contractors. Each artist was personally and financially responsible for the rehabilitation of one room and its conversion into a private studio space, as well as for pitching in on renovations for the larger common areas of the mansion whose costs were underwritten by the church. In exchange, their overhead costs are kept to a minimum.

The space opened to the public with a reception and weekend of open studio exhibits in late September. Today, there are eight artists-in-residence, with space available for three more. For now, SPAG is open by appointment only, but the artists are in the process of collaborating on two new exhibits, one which they hope to present to the public in late January in partnership with a charity event and a second slated for the first weekend in June.

As for the church itself, and its Father B, Montoya says, "His knowledge and love of art are inspiring to me, and he has a way about him and a way of portraying the church that made it feel really positive to come back here and to be part of this incredible project."

Later, sitting with the priest, he notes, "I look for his critique and his voice [regarding] my work. It's always truthful, honest."

Boccaccio interrupts to add, "And correct!" with a boisterous laugh, then says, "They've all done a magnificent job. Seeing this beautiful building coming back to life has been a joy."

Amen to that.

editor@fairfieldweekly.com