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YMCA renovation hailed Campaign raises \$6,748,935

By Lisa D. Welsh TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

WORCESTER— When Neil Nicoll became the president and CEO of the YMCA of Greater Worcester (now the YMCA of Central Massachusetts) in 1980, the facility at 766 Main St. was a traditional “Y” with a private men’s club model, 100 dorm rooms for men only and no women were allowed in the pool.

Yesterday, he returned to a state-of-the-art community center that still offers aquatics but welcomes men, women and children who participate in programs that go far beyond that of a health club’s.



Jason Ayala of Worcester works out yesterday in the new wellness center at the YMCA of Central Massachusetts Central Community Branch at 766 Main St., where a ribbon-cutting ceremony was held after a renovation project. (T&G Staff/JIM COLLINS)

Mr. Nicoll left Worcester in 1992 and after 14 years as president and CEO of the YMCA of Greater Seattle, he became president and CEO of YMCA of the USA in 2006. He is the 13th leader of the national organization, which began in Boston in 1851.

“It’s good to be home again,” said Mr. Nicoll, who was in town for the Central Massachusetts’ 2008 annual Recognition Event and the Central Community Branch ribbon-cutting ceremony held yesterday at 766 Main St.

The event combined the traditional recognition awards to outstanding youth and adult volunteers with a celebration of the end of YMCA’s \$6,748,935 capital campaign and years-long renovation.

As head of one of the country’s largest philanthropic organizations, with 2,686 YMCAs nationwide serving 21 million people, Mr. Nicoll’s presence last night underscored the significance of the local YMCA.

“Worcester is one of a small number of YMCAs that I hold up as a prototype for the rest of the country to emulate,” Mr. Nicoll said. “Worcester was a great experience.”

More than 200 people attended the event and leaders of the capital campaign credited the community for surpassing the \$6.5 million goal. Besides individual contributions, the YMCA’s board of directors committed \$800,000 with 100 percent participation and there was full participation of all local foundations.

Board member Gene J. DeFeudis’ \$500,000 gift is the largest from an individual to the YMCA and the George I. Alden Trust’s \$2.2 million grant is the largest gift from any source to the organization.

“It’s getting harder to raise money, but there are generous people and foundations that are still supportive of what they consider to be a priority for their community,” said Mr. Nicoll.

“The community’s commitment to this Y is just unbelievable to me. It’s tremendous,” he said.

The “Strength of the Team” capital campaign for the two Worcester branches — the Central Community Branch and the Greendale Family Branch — began on May 8, 2006, and yesterday’s event signaled its conclusion.

Besides the ongoing expansion at the Greendale Family Branch, the board decided that renovations were necessary after 22 years of little more than maintenance work at the Main Street branch. A second floor was added to the facility for an administration suite so that more room on the main floor can be dedicated to members’ use.

“We decided to really invest in the Y and expand its programs, but first we needed to improve and expand the building’s current conditions,” said the board chairman and campaign co-chairman, Robert E. Maynard Jr.

“The building needed to be attractive to get people in the door. Once they’ve done that, the programs are so great, they’ll stay,” he said. “We wanted something really different to get them in the door.”

That is accomplished with a dramatic new light tower at the Main Street entrance. As the most visible backdrop of the renovations, organizers say, it symbolizes the “beacon of hope” showing that the YMCA is not just a place, but a community.

Several benefactors to the capital campaign attended, including individual donors and representatives of local businesses and foundations.

“Many of the people who attended the event have such amazing ties to our history,” said Kathryn Zingg Hunter, president and CEO of the YMCA of Central Massachusetts. “For over 144 years, the YMCA of Central Massachusetts has been a safe place for people to come where they can connect, be nurtured, mentored and grow.”

“Our renovations didn’t just improve the building,” Ms. Hunter said, “they allow us to improve the lives of so many more people.”