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Metuchen diocese opens Rutgers ministry Renovated convent houses new center

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NEW BRUNSWICK — Sisters John Louise McCann and Pat Dotzauer stood in a second-floor office suite at the new Catholic Center at Rutgers University Friday sharing memories of where, in the thoroughly remodeled building, their bedrooms used to be.

"We were in the old

house, the Harding House. That was the original," said McCann, who lived in the former convent at 94 Somerset St. and taught first grade at St. Peter School for 40 years.

Dotzauer, a former vice principal and principal at St. Peter School, noted that the building — adjacent to St. Peter the Apostle Roman Catholic Parish — is actu-

ally three buildings. The brownstone Harding House was built in 1869, and additions were added in 1897 and 1950.

When McCann first arrived, 30 Sisters of Charity lived there. When Dotzauer came in 1986, there were 18 sisters. The convent closed in 2004. It was formally reopened Friday as the new home of the Diocese of Metuchen's campus ministry at Rutgers.

"It couldn't be used for a better ministry," Dotzauer said. "It's wonderful. Absolutely wonderful."

Bishop Paul G. Bootkoski, Mayor Jim Cahill and Rutgers University President Richard McCormick each spoke at the opening ceremony, among others. Cahill is a lifelong parishioner of St. Peter the Apostle Parish.

The \$3.8 million renovation allowed the diocese to move its Catholic Center from a trio of houses on Mine Street into the vacated convent, selling the Mine Street property back to Rutgers, according to the Rev. Peter Cebulka, director of the Catholic Center.

Robert E. Campbell, chairman of the Catholic Campus Center Strategic Planning Committee and a former Johnson & Johnson vice president, said back in 2004, his committee met with plans to demolish and replace the Mine Street buildings.

"We were fortunate to have, throughout this whole evolutionary process, a committee that was very open to new ideas and concepts, and they always had an eye toward how we could do something different and perhaps (make)

something new out of the old," he said.

The interior of the 16,300-square-foot facility was completely renovated and outfitted with new heating and air conditioning, electrical wiring and technological upgrades. The newly painted walls are framed by crown molding and stylish new furniture adorns the offices, meeting rooms and dining hall in the three-story building. The original chapel has been restored, as have its stained glass windows. On the third floor is an apartment for guest speakers.



STAFF PHOTO: JOE McLAUGHLIN

Standing outside the main entrance to the new Diocese of Metuchen's campus ministry at Rutgers are (from left) Bishop Paul G. Bootkoski; the Rev. Peter C. Cebulka, director of the Catholic Center at Rutgers and the Rev. Sylvester J. Cronin, executive director of stewardship and development at the Diocese of Metuchen.

"There are so many rooms," said Nicole Cheatle, a senior at Rutgers. "When we were at our other building and we had Spirit Nights (a weekly event at the center) or men's or women's groups, we had to have them in all different places, there was never enough room. Now we can have five different meetings going on at the same time at the Catholic Center. So it really helps our organization."

Bootkoski, a former campus minister at Rutgers University-Newark and former assistant vice president for student affairs at Seton Hall University, said

college is an important time for young adults, and it is important for the church to have a presence there.

"I think the church should be there in a welcoming and compassionate way that they know they have a place to come, and they will be accepted for who they are and what they are and what they're about," he said.

And, though the center will now serve a new group of people, the spirit of the building remains the same, said Sister Maureen Cawley, a long-time educator at St. Peter School who lived at the convent until it closed in 2004.

"This is a holy place," Cawley said. "And so it's a great new role for it."

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