

Pictures tell story of a city and university

Rutgers dormitories house students and the history of where they live

Sunday, September 18, 2005

BY PEGGY McGLONE

Star-Ledger Staff

The Rutgers students who just moved into the university's downtown New Brunswick residence hall are being introduced to their adopted city through photographs decorating the halls and community spaces of the ritzy new dorm.

Shot by Rutgers' Mason Gross School of the Arts photography students Deborah Bowie and Jamie Lyn Mitchell, the photos in Rockoff Hall are more than just decoration. They serve as a link between the city and the university, between its newest residents and those who have lived in New Brunswick for years.

"This building is more than a residence hall, it's representative of the true integration of the city and the university," said Christopher Paladino, president of the New Brunswick Development Corp., a nonprofit organization founded in the mid-1970s to spearhead redevelopment.

Devco spent \$20,000 to commission the artists, print, frame and hang the work. "This building represents change in New Brunswick, and the art was in some way a preservation effort."

Paladino said the photographs also engage the students with their new city home, an 11-story building constructed by Devco and its partner, Penrose Properties.

"In a subtle way, it gets the students to appreciate the broader community they live in and reinforces the obligations we have to each other," Paladino said.

Although the photographs will be seen only by the Rutgers students living in Rockoff Hall, the public will be able to view the work this month at the Mason Gross Galleries at Civic Square. Gallery hours are Mondays-Fridays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

"Devco didn't put a lot of demands on us creatively; they wanted our view, how we saw it," said Mitchell, a 28-year-old Mason Gross alum who lives in Jersey City. "It's not only a diverse community, but you can feel this energy in the city. That's what I tried to represent."

Images of buildings new and old, neighborhoods, student gathering places and the city's many theaters remind Rockoff residents of the city's cultural diversity and its thriving arts scene. The images also reinforce the city's constant evolution.

"Ten years from now it may be very different from what it is today. The students will be coming to live in that dorm and a lot of them won't know New Brunswick in this way," said Bowie, whose black and white photos -- many of people -- balance Mitchell's colorful landscapes and architectural portraits.

Working separately, Bowie and Mitchell created a portrait of the city that celebrates its working-class roots and its college-town energy, as well as its suit-and-tie corporate side.

"The concept was that they would shoot for a year all around New Brunswick," said Mason Gross associate dean Dennis Benson. "Deborah works primarily in black and white, Jamie Lyn Mitchell in color. So it's two perspectives."

Benson said the collaborative spirit of the project is beneficial to the university and to the city.

"It's terrific because it gives our students an opportunity to work professionally," he said.

More collaborations are in the works. A Mason Gross photographic technician has been hired by Devco to document the hundreds of people building Heldrich Plaza, another Devco construction project across the street from Rockoff Hall. A broader photographic effort involving workers in New Jersey -- to be part of the Workforce Development Center housed in the building -- is in discussion.

"And as long as we keep doing terrific results, I think there will be more to come," Benson said.

Paladino concurred.

"We're committed to a long-term relationship with Mason Gross," he said. "We hope to experiment with different media to develop ... a collection that people can view in a variety of places."