

Montgomery: A victory for SMOC's Sage House

GHS

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I am rejoicing for the families at Sage House! Despite the effort by many to deny Sage House its occupancy permit, the Framingham ZBA rightfully concluded that this is indeed an educational program, covered under the Dover Amendment.

Sage House is a home for up to 15 families to heal themselves from scars caused by drug addiction and/or alcohol and participate in a "Remedial Life 101" educational course. For most of us, this is a very difficult concept to understand. We haven't had the struggles of mere survival; somehow or other, we've been able to withstand the challenges that life brings us daily. Not everyone is so fortunate. Some turn to drugs, others alcohol, and sometimes, in the midst of it all, innocent children become part of the picture. Thank SMOC for bringing a place like Sage House into their lives.

How many of us have lived in a neighborhood in which a social service agency was sited?

I live around the corner from a residential school for troubled teenage girls on Salem End Road, and except that I've made a few friendly visits, I'd have never known it was there. For the last year and a half, I have lived next door to a SMOC-run program for up to 12 women, many of whom were previously homeless and all of them with addiction struggles.

Although one selectman tried to discourage its opening, insisting it would ruin the neighborhood, I have yet to encounter a problem with these neighbors. SMOC did a fantastic job refurbishing the home, which improved the neighborhood, and there have been no complaints from surrounding neighbors.

The women pick up trash along the side of the road and put up creative holiday displays in front of their temporary home, ordinary stuff like you and me. I invited them over for dinner one evening. They brought gifts of appreciation (totally unnecessary!) and great conversation - it was enlightening and fun, and I wished them the best on their upward journey.

I feel badly that fears have been instilled into the hearts of so many. People in programs such as Sage House have a vested interest in improving their lives - they want to succeed. Like many of us, they want to live a happier life. They are there to devote six months of their life to counseling, parenting classes, AA and NA meetings among other learning experiences. It's a hard road, and they should be admired, not shunned.

The attitude of some Framingham residents to prevent Sage House from opening has saddened and angered me over the last two years. Likewise, the lawsuit that SMOC brought against these individuals has had the same effect. Some of these people named are friends of mine - I do not admire their behavior and attitude regarding Sage House, but we can agree to disagree, and still remain on respectful terms.

I do, however, feel badly that many have listened to untruths and have been prey to fear-mongering tactics spewed from the mouths of longtime anti-social service agency leaders of our town. They spit "SMOC" out like a four letter word, and have abused their power to lead and influence others. After several verbal and written warnings from our town legal counsel, they continued. Hence, the unfortunate, but inevitable, lawsuit.

My most fervent hope is that respectful, thoughtful mediation will once again resume, that neighbors will learn to be tolerant and compassionate, and that Framingham's reserve fund will be depleted no further. Let's reserve that money to build the town up, not tear it apart.

- DIANE MONTGOMERY

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