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## Renovating old buildings, young lives in Overtown

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Lidia Reyes, left, holds her two-month-old baby, Kenyah, as two-year-old Alonah, center, plays, Thursday, May 19, 2011. Reyes a guest at Lotus House, 217 NW 15th Street, a shelter for women that opened in 2006. The shelter is now expanding to its fourth building.

On a half-forlorn block in Overtown, a shock of a pink house sits next to a green house and a yellow house, and next to that is the newest one, in a purplish blue, brightening a spot that was defined not long ago by a carpet of trash and the charred shell of an apartment building.

Set amid the cluster of buildings are lush gardens, a laden mango tree, wicker chairs and tables shaded by cafe umbrellas. The scene is animated by the gurgling of water in a fountain, the bustle of women attending to small children, and the comings and goings of staff members in white T-shirts bearing the pink-script emblem of this remarkable place.

This is Lotus House, a shelter for homeless women and children, among them some of the hardest cases from some of the toughest streets in Miami, for whom it is the last, best resort they could hope to find. But “shelter” doesn’t begin to describe Lotus House.

The women who live here are called “guests,” and they are lovingly tended to in a singular course of treatment that combines hard-nosed counseling and therapy with art and alternative therapies. Think A.A., computer training, yoga and visits to artists’ studios, all wrapped up in lots of TLC.

The shelter is the handiwork of a formerly high-powered real-estate lawyer and investor who quietly leveraged her wealth, savvy and connections to create a sanctuary that, since opening a scant five years ago, has set several hundred women and children on a path to new lives.

Last month, the mostly privately funded Lotus House expanded into its fourth renovated building, doubling its capacity to 110 women and children, much to the delight of founder Constance Collins Margulies. She appears to derive more satisfaction from the modest, purple-hued concrete structure — which she snagged out of foreclosure, gutted and fully rehabbed — than she once did financing and developing big, sexy urban commercial and residential projects in New York, Washington, D.C., and Miami.

“In my view it’s the most beautiful building in Miami — I don’t care what anyone says,” said Collins with a laugh, sitting by the fountain in the garden in her trademark long cotton skirt and canvas shoes.

Collins, 51, came to Miami from Washington to redevelop a big piece of Miracle Mile in Coral Gables and then left the business world behind to conjure up what became Lotus House. Her new undertaking brought its own karmic reward: In the process, she met Miami developer, art collector and Overtown Youth Center

founder Martin Margulies, whom she approached for advice. Collins visited him at his Key Biscayne condo, filled with contemporary art she didn't then understand. He heard her plan, then asked her out.

They married in the Lotus House garden in 2008.

"It's a great story," Margulies says. "She gave it all up for this. I taught her about art and she taught me about homelessness. It's been a very gratifying relationship."

Lotus House was abuzz on a recent weekday morning as passing bands from Hurricane Irene drenched the city and left the sky looking bruised. It was moving day, and several of the guests, some wearing trash bags smartly converted into raincoats, excitedly lugged their belongings to the new building, babies and children in tow. Collins wants to mix experienced guests with the newcomers who will soon join the expanded Lotus House because peer guidance — teaching mutual support and instilling a strong sense of community — is a key component of its therapeutic approach.

"This place was heaven, and this here is the garden of Eden," said Rhoda Lopez, 56, gesturing at the cozy patio behind the shelter's gate. A Lotus House alum who moved into permanent housing in February after five months at the shelter, she stopped by to help with the moving, like many graduates who return to volunteer or fill a staff job. "There's no other place like this, i don't think."

The shelter's warmth, the gardens and the ambience, the budget-conscious yet artful renovations of the old buildings, the museum-quality art on the walls — it all flows from Collins. She softens an iron work ethic with a New Age tinge and casually peppers conversation with phrases like "collective oneness," which led a local business newspaper to describe her as "hippie-ish."

Although she can be found at Lotus House six days a week, including Sunday afternoons for poetry and creative writing sessions, Collins shuns credit for the shelter's successes.

Rai Johnson, 50, the shelter's health and wellness director and herself a Lotus House alum, said: "If you thank her for something, she says, 'Thank the universe.' At first we were, like, 'Hmm.' Now we say it, too."

Lotus House is the only shelter in Miami-Dade that focuses exclusively on women and children, and it does so with an unusually comprehensive program, said David Raymond, executive director of the county's Homeless Trust, which helps fund and oversee local services for the destitute. "They have a way of dealing with the whole person that's very healing," he said.

Healing — emotional as well as physical — is something every guest at Lotus House is in dire need of. Many of the women are pregnant when they arrive, often right off the street, and so the shelter provides pre-natal counseling and basic care at an in-house clinic. Some are elderly, disabled or ill; it's not unusual to have a guest who is undergoing treatment for cancer, Collins says. And many of the women suffer from drug or alcohol dependency. Lotus House sends them to residential treatment and takes them back when they're done.

The guests can stay up to a year without rent, pitching in on chores and immersed in an all-hands-on-deck environment meant not just to instill self-sufficiency, but to get them to imagine lives they otherwise might never have conceived of.

The blend of the practical and the aesthetic is on show in the gleaming kitchen and dining room, where "guests" eat, help serve meals and learn professional food prep. On the wall by the entrance are framed artworks by French artist Denise Aubertin consisting of copies of classic books that have been encrusted in herbs and spices and baked.

"I wanted the women in the shelter to be inspired to pursue whatever they want, and art has this capacity to

dissolve boundaries,” Collins says. “The program here is not about a meal and a bed. This is a very organic way of healing. There is no timetable. Our goal is to provide a sanctuary to talk about what brought you here, to grieve, forgive yourself and others, and move on.”

It’s one of the first things Lotus House alums bring up in discussing how they were helped.

“These were things many of us never did. Yoga. Art. Visiting the botanical gardens,” said Johnson, the Lotus House wellness director who has a degree in social work but found herself despondent, on drugs and homeless after the murder of her son. “It opened my mind. I was able to see quicker what the goal was. If I had gone somewhere else, I don’t know that I would have been in this spirit that I’m in. Instead of taking, I’m giving.”

Monyia Knights, 47, is one of three residential managers at Lotus House, responsible for maintenance and operations and supervising guests and their chores. Knights had not worked in two decades, much of which she spent focused on scoring drugs, when she arrived at the shelter as a guest in June 2010.

“ I learned that the box I thought was this little,” she said, marking out a small, invisible container with her hands before opening her arms wide, “was actually this big. There is no limit to what you can do.”

That last precept has guided Collins on her lifelong, roundabout course to Lotus House.

Born in Detroit into a family she describes as “gypsies,” Collins moved around during childhood. She handled big real-estate transactions as an attorney until, eager for new challenges, she joined developer Robert Wennett in 1998 as a partner in Urban Investment Advisors, which specialized in urban infill development in New York and D.C. The company’s biggest project was in Coral Gables, a 15-story residential and commercial building that houses the popular Tarpon Bend restaurant.

Collins ran the demanding project. In 2004, when it was done, she realized she was, too.

“It was no longer challenging on a spiritual level,” Collins said. “I thought, if I do one more transaction, I’m going to throw myself off the roof.”

That next move grew from a stroke of chance. Collins had noticed a homeless woman who hung around the project area on Miracle Mile, pulling at her hair and talking to herself. One day Collins asked the woman why she didn’t go to a shelter. The woman said she found them intimidating. full of menacing men.

“She taught me a shelter needed to feel like home, a place where these women are loved, supported and given the resources they need,” Collins said.

She and Wennett sold off the one million square feet of real estate in their portfolio and dissolved the partnership.

“Constance is one of the most brilliant people I’ve ever met. She can make anything happen,” Wennett said. “I imagine there are not a lot of people doing this outreach with her set of skills.”

Collins bought the first two buildings in Overtown for \$675,000 using her own money. Though one of the two, built in the 1920s, was a burned-out husk, she recognized the structure was solid. She and a group of volunteers hauled mountains of trash out of what is now a garden and planted it heavily. She tapped pro-bono architects and zoning lawyers.

When the shelter opened in March 2006, Collins immediately found herself turning away more women than she could serve. Margulies sold art to finance the purchase of a third building that would house mothers and infants. And to produce income and provide guests with paying work, Collins established a stylish thrift

store in Wynwood.

Now she's working on raising a \$10 million endowment, interest from which would provide half the shelter's operating expenses, which rose to \$1.4 million a year with the expansion. Because only 15 percent of that is covered by public funding, donations will be critical, Collins says. In October, she is launching what she hopes will be an annual fundraising art fair in Wynwood.

Her ambitious goal is for Lotus House to be run entirely by alums one day. "If you're operating on principles of empowerment, you better empower," she says.

Some days, though, the job can be a grind. Margulies says there are frequent calls in the middle of the night, life-crisis problems to solve every day, a constant scramble to find scant resources for needy guests. But Collins always seems to find a way. To furnish cribs for the new building, she persuaded a donor to lend the shelter a personal credit card.

"I have given up a lot of material wealth over these years," she says. "On a spiritual level, though, there is no way to describe the rewards when you live with your heart. I am so blessed to be surrounded by these women and children."

For that, she can thank the universe.

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