

ROLLING UP HER SLEEVES

Dinner, renamed building celebrate Pat Andriole's service to Branford

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By Lisa Reisman

lisareisman27@gmail.com

Sometime in the late 1990s, Pat Andriole was driving along Branford's Harrison Avenue. She saw the old police station. Its windows were dark. A light bulb went on in her head.

Arguably, Andriole, who will be honored at a retirement dinner at 4:30 p.m. on Sunday, June 2 at the Pine Orchard Country Club, had no reason to stop and ponder the building's potential. Already, since her 1963 arrival in Branford, she had dedicated her life to the town's well-being.

Take the early 1970s, when, amid a slew of teenage deaths from drugs and alcohol, she formed a 24-hour-a-day "Help Line" with social worker Brian Lynch, its immediate success ripping the Band Aid off the notion of a picturesque seaside town unsullied by social ills.

She could have stopped with the "Help Line," but she didn't. Having opened the town's eyes to the need for a full-time facility for those in need, she led the fight for its funding, organizing citizens to pack the town budget meeting and ensure the Branford Counseling Center would be built.

That might have been enough, too, but she kept going, volunteering as Chairperson there, working day and night to help those in the most dire straits



Bill O'Brien photos

Andriole receiving a check for \$18,000 for the Branford Counseling Basic Needs Program at a concert on the Green in August 2011. Below right, Pat Andriole, who is retiring from the Branford Counseling Center.

secure assistance for clothes, food, diapers, and fuel, a petite woman with a steely determination to pull those who had hit rock-bottom back on their feet.

All the while, the single mother "with more energy than anyone I've ever met," as Branford First Selectman Anthony "Unk" DaRos put it, never missed any of her three children's swim meets or track meets or soccer games—even if it meant, on more than one occasion, racing across the state from one town to another.

Sure, on the day she regarded the old police station, her chil-

dren were grown — Charlie making a name for himself in business, Kathy in medicine, and David a successful Hollywood actor and lawyer — but the New Britain native was still putting in upwards of 60 hours a week as director of the Counseling Center, offering mental health counseling, substance abuse assistance, and crisis management for any town resident, whether they could pay or not.

Then again, this was Pat Andriole. And "people like Pat," said friend and fellow Rotarian Charlotte Mattei, "you come

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Pat," said friend and fellow Rotarian Charlotte Mattei, "you come across once in a lifetime. People who just live and breathe to help others and go about it quietly, no questions asked, no matter where, no matter when."

This was Pat Andriole who demonstrated time and again her staunch belief that, according to former Branford Police Chief Robert Gill, "the sooner you get involved, the sooner the resolution."

As the pixie-haired, smartly dressed 81-year-old grandmother of three recalled in her sunny office last week, the Soup Cellar, an earlier incarnation

of the Community Dining Room, "was growing out of the Baptist Church"; it desperately required a larger facility to meet increasing demand. Not only that — the headquarters of the Clothing Bank and the Food Pantry at the Indian Neck School were about to be displaced by expanding school programs.

So, really, it was only natural that when her town's most vital social service providers were in danger of going homeless, the woman who's "never waited to be asked when she sees a need for help," in Gill's words, would fix her sights on finding them permanent shelter.

Until that drive along Harrison Avenue, though, it hadn't occurred to her that the old police station would be ideal. It was one block from the Town Green, after all. It offered easy access to public transportation. Better yet, there was enough room for those in need to find hot meals, food staples, clothing and fellowship under one roof.

The daughter of a postal clerk and a Rosie the Riveter mother invited First Selectman DaRos to a meeting to discuss her idea. She also summoned 40 others to voice their support of the building's conversion.

"You just don't say no to Pat," said Charlotte Mattei.

Evidently not. Having won approval for new use of the building, she recruited a small army of volunteers from the Rotary Club. Each Saturday for a year, they arrived at 30 Harrison Ave., sledgehammers, hammers, and screwdrivers in hand. Among them was Andriole who's "never shied away from the front lines," said her daughter Kathy, an associate professor of Radiology at Harvard Medical School. She also sold bricks and held fundraisers. If you ask any of the nearly 300 people why they donate their time to the Volunteer Services Center (VSC), which opened in 2000 and is home to Branford's Community Dining Room, Clothing Bank, and Food Council, the most common reply is that it, quite simply, makes them happy. Some see their work as a way of giving back. Others derive satisfaction from seeing people "up against it" eventually find their footing.

They might as well have been echoing the impulse that has animated Pat Andriole's four decades of service to Branford. Indeed, the emphasis on preserving the dignity of anyone who walks through its doors for help is trademark Andriole, said DaRos the morning after the Branford Board of Selectmen unanimously voted to rename the VSC the Patricia Andriole Volunteer Services Center last week.

"Any community is measured by how they take care of its least fortunate," DaRos said. "And by any measure Pat Andriole has elevated Branford to a level other towns can only aspire to."

That's why future generations of Branford citizens will see Patricia Andriole's name affixed on the Harrison Avenue building. Perhaps some, wondering how that came to be, will learn of the number of lives saved and catastrophes averted by the work of the Branford Coalition to Prevent Underage Drinking, for which Andriole secured a series of hefty grants. Or understand why, due to her tireless efforts, they no longer regard mental illness as a stigma but as a chronic disease.

Or perhaps, having heard the story of the center's creation, another extraordinary citizen will drive by an old building and have a vision of what it might become, and the verve and initiative to see it through.

Editor's note: To purchase tickets for Patricia Andriole's retirement dinner, send a check, payable to Charlotte Mattei, to Lisa Andriole, 47 Blackstone Ave. Branford CT 06405. Tickets are \$65.



Andriole speaking of needs of Branford families at a benefit concert of the Branford High School Chorus at New Haven's Woolsey Hall entitled "Roll Over Beethoven." Bill O'Brien photo.