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Healing home

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Article Text:

Former U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop made a visit to Castleton on Thursday to honor a man who has dedicated at least 3-1/2 decades of his life to working with the mentally ill.

Willem Leenman, 58, has owned and directed Forty Seven Main Street, an 11-occupancy home in Castleton for people living with afflictions such as schizophrenia, bipolar and severe depression, full time since 1979. Koop, who served from 1981 to 1989, presented Leenman with a coin minted specifically by the surgeon general - a privilege the office holds.

"It was really nice, I was really touched by the whole thing," said Leenman on Thursday afternoon. Koop stayed after the late-morning ceremony and joined residents and staff for lunch.

During an interview prior to the ceremony, Leenman said he was embarrassed to be recognized for his work.

"I've always tried to keep a low profile," he said. "No one is proud to live at Forty Seven Main Street. There's a stigma attached to mental illness that is very much there."

The place Koop called an oasis for people with mental illness was founded in 1969 by Leenman's parents. They were inspired after staying at Spring Lake Ranch in Cuttingsville.

Although the actual address is 706 Main St. in Castleton, the name of the center came from its original address.

When Leenman's parents moved to Castleton, the houses were not numbered, as they had been in their native country, the Netherlands. One day his father started at the end of the street and counted off by odd number until he arrived back at the house. Its original name was Therapeutic Community Center, which the younger Leenman changed after taking the helm.

In 1985, when his parents retired and returned to Europe, Leenman went to a friend for advice about taking over the business. He was told not to do it, that the private-care home would never survive.

"I don't like to be told I can't do something," said Leenman. "I think it was fantastic that I didn't have a clue what I was getting into."

There are 12 staff members at the house, which relies largely on private funding to stay open.

"I'm a lousy business person, I find it philosophically impossible to make money off someone else's unhappiness," Leenman said. He admits complying with ever-changing state regulations has made it difficult some years to stay on top financially. "If we make a profit, we make maybe \$2,000. Some years we make no profit."

Otto Marx is the psychiatrist for Forty Seven Main Street and is on-site at least once a month. He has worked with Leenman and the residents for about 11 years.

"People really get the individual attention they need," said Marx, about what makes Forty Seven Main Street unique. "(That) is often hard to come by in a country where everyone likes things in categories."

For the last two years the home has not accepted females because more males were coming through the door.

There is no set time that residents, who range in age from 20 to 60 years old, stay at Forty Seven Main Street; there are too many factors at play.

Leenman has worked to establish a community among residents and staff. Besides contributing to the household chores and working in the garden at the home, residents have also participated in the Multiple Sclerosis Walk and in the local CROP Walk.

"We try to get our residents to look beyond (themselves)," Leenman said. A request at Forty Seven Main Street is to have residents do each of the following every day: something for community, something for themselves, something artistic, something intellectual and something physical.

"I wanted to have something that looks like a community, where everyone can be the best person they can be - whatever that means - where everyone can feel safe and everyone can grow."

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Caption:

Former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop (second from left) presents Willem Leenman (left) of Forty Seven Main Street in Castleton with a special coin recognizing Leenman for his work at the facility. VYTO STARINSKAS / RUTLAND HERALD

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