

Volunteer center celebrates 20 years

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Patricia C. Andriole services nationally acclaimed in providing vital social services to those in need

By Lisa Reisman

BRANFORD — Little known fact: the building housing the Patricia C. Andriole Volunteer Services Center on Harrison Avenue in Branford has won national acclaim.

"Not for its architecture," former First Selectman Unk DaRos told a lively crowd celebrating the building's 20th anniversary at the Community Dining Room April 11, "but how it was modeled by volunteers."

The reason: "It's one-stop shopping," said Patricia "Pat" Andriole, the seemingly indefatigable super-citizen who, along with serving 44 years as executive director of the Branford Counseling Center, spearheaded the effort to consolidate the town's most

vital social service providers under one roof.

"You can get a meal, clothing, and you can get food to take home," she added, noting there's also space for the fundraising book inventory managed by Friends of the Blackstone Library for its annual sale.

Over a year, that amounts to 50,000 meals served by volunteers at the CDR and 175,000 articles of hand-selected clothing offered by the BHCare Clothing Bank just down the hall from the dining room. One floor below, there's also the Food Pantry, headed up by Executive Director Wendy Knowles, providing groceries for 60 to 90 families a day, with three to four new families a week.

"There's always going to be a need, but we're putting

a dent in it," said CDR Executive Director Judith Barron.

That's because, as she put it, "we all work together on a daily basis, resourcing out and referring to one another to be able to provide service to people in need."

Not to mention the seemingly most vital, and precious, resource that has the VSC reaching the two-decade milestone, according to state Rep. Sean Scanlon, D-Guilford.

"The fact that this is primarily volunteer-run and has served tens of thousands of people in this community for 20 years is such an incredible testament not just to the people that make this go but to the community in Branford itself, because we are a

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Lisa Reisman / Contributed photo

Pat Andriole, left, listens as former First Selectman Unk DaRos sings her praises and that of the town's Pat Andriole Volunteer Service Center which provides one stop shopping for those who need a helping hand.

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community that cares, we are a community that gives back," he said.

"It's a privilege to help people who are up against it eventually find their footing," said longtime BHCare Clothing Bank volunteer Anita Ruggiero, who was sampling a mini chocolate cheesecake in the packed space.

She might as well have been echoing the policy of BHCare Clothing Coordinator Joan McFarlane-Nwagboli, ever since she was operating the Clothing Bank out of two trailers in the parking lot of the former Branford police station in the 1990s.

"We don't want to insult any of our people with dirty or worn-out clothes," McFarlane-Nwagboli said. "I want our people to find beautiful things that make them feel good inside."

The emphasis on preserving the dignity

of anyone who walks through its doors for help is trademark Andriole, according to DaRos, and explains why, in 2013, the Branford Board of Selectmen unanimously voted to rename the VSC the Patricia C. Andriole Volunteer Services Center.

"Any community is measured by how they take care of its least fortunate," the former First Selectman said. "And by any measure this building, which is fittingly in Pat's name, has elevated Branford to a level other towns can only aspire to."

With that, he turned to Andriole. "The building has fared well in 20 years, hasn't it?" he asked.

"Sure has," she answered with a wry smile. "Better than some of us."

► The Patricia C. Andriole Volunteer Services Center is located at 30 Harrison Ave. Branford.

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