

BAY AREA & STATE

North Beach Citizens finds new home in old porn theater

By Heather Knight | April 11, 2015 | Updated: April 16, 2015 3:54pm

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Photo: Leah Millis / The Chronicle

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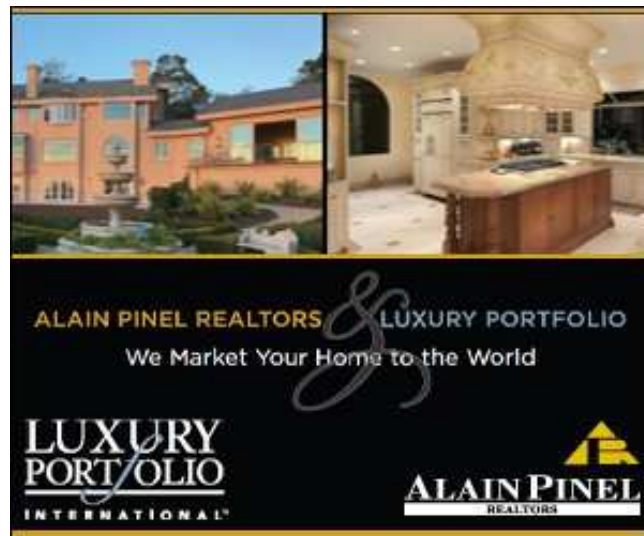
Brewing

In San Francisco's crazed real estate market, nonprofits must get creative if they want to retain a foothold in the increasingly expensive city.

Some go into debt. Some move into basements. North Beach Citizens has found its solution in a long-vacant adult movie theater, complete with a mirror-walled, shag-carpeted apartment upstairs.

Crews are working to turn the former North Beach Movie theater into a space suitable for nonprofit staff and the homeless people they help.

According to Yelp reviews from the mid-2000s, the theater once sported a marquee boasting of the "nastiest videos in town." The marquee is still there, the distinctive wording is not.



With the help of a donor who wants to remain anonymous, North Beach Citizens paid \$1.757 million in cash for the property at [1034 Kearny St.](#) and expects to move this summer.

It is in the midst of trying to raise \$5 million, including the price of the property, the remodeling work and the additional staff that will fit in the bigger space. The goal is to double the number of homeless clients served each year.

The nonprofit group has been paying rent on a Columbus Avenue office for years with only a month-to-month lease and has long wanted a permanent space.

“The risk of us being kicked out and

MORE BY HEATHER KNIGHT

Peskin-Christensen race tests strength of power brokers, far left



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homeless ourselves has been in the back of our minds for quite a long time,” said Ruth Yankoupe, president of the nonprofit’s board.

It’s certainly not a unique concern for San Francisco nonprofits. A Board of Supervisors budget and legislative analyst’s report from October 2013 found that commercial rents had increased by 33 percent in the previous two years and that nonprofits were struggling to sign and renew leases when squaring off against tech firms and businesses with deeper pockets.

Some nonprofits have closed, some have moved to Oakland or other less-expensive locales, some have gone into debt and others are squeezing into tighter spaces.

The choice of an old porn theater as a new home may seem odd, but North Beach Citizens Executive Director Kristie Fairchild has a sense of humor about it. Giving a tour of the apartment above the theater, which she envisions becoming a quiet, private space for counseling, she said, “You can only imagine what happened here in the ’70s.”

North Beach Citizens has its roots in the movies, too, though of a less raunchy sort. It was conceived by filmmaker Francis Ford Coppola, who once lived in North Beach and reportedly wrote much of the screenplay for “The Godfather” at the neighborhood’s famed Caffe Trieste.

In 2000, Coppola met with neighborhood residents and business owners to discuss the growing number of homeless people in North Beach. They envisioned a base in the neighborhood for those in need to get help.

They wanted a creative leader to look at the problem differently and hired Fairchild, a ceramics artist, who has been the nonprofit’s director every since.

Christensen, Peskin waste no time in growling at each other

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S.F. Zoo’s remaining chimps endanger accreditation

“I had lived in New York and I was streetwise, I guess you could say,” Fairchild said.

North Beach Citizens officially started operations in January 2001 and last year found housing for 100 people — saving the city \$50,000 per person, it says, in emergency medical care and jail services. It also distributes more than 68,000 pounds of food every year and employs homeless people to collect 3,000 bags of trash a year from North Beach streets and parks.

Bevan Dufty, Mayor Ed Lee’s director of homeless services, said North Beach Citizens has always stood out because of the great relationship it has with the neighborhood as a whole. That certainly isn’t the case in all San Francisco neighborhoods, many of which don’t want such service providers nearby for fear of drawing more homeless people.

“They really understand their community, and they are accountable,” Dufty said. “They just do such a great job, and it’s inspiring to see how the neighborhood supports them and feels good about what they’re doing. They stand apart.”

He said he has sometimes sent neighborhood groups who gripe about homelessness to visit North Beach Citizens. “Don’t be frustrated,” Dufty said he tells them. “Aspire to do something like North Beach Citizens.”

The need certainly isn’t dissipating. Fairchild said that she used to work mostly with chronically homeless people but that the city’s thriving economy and sky-high real estate prices mean that there are more newly homeless people who’ve lost low-paying jobs and can’t find cheap housing to fall back on.

Fairchild tries to tailor her services to each person’s specific needs, and doesn’t consider her work finished once she finds them a vacant SRO spot or other housing option.

“When we take people, we take them forever,” she said.

One of those “forever” clients is Richard Santini, 35, a native of Florida who moved to San Francisco 2½ years ago. He was homeless until Fairchild took him under her wing and found him a room in the Apollo Hotel in the Mission District and a job cleaning up

North Beach.

Santini said he'd been ashamed to be living on the streets and serving as such a poor role model for his nieces and nephews — and being a financial drag on his other relatives. Now he's proud that he has a home base.

“It's my home,” he said. “It's my sanctuary.”

Soon, North Beach Citizens will have that, too.

UPDATE: North Beach Citizens' annual fundraiser last weekend raised \$410,000 toward their new building and its operations and drew 430 people including founder Francis Ford Coppolla and George Lucas. Apparently the latter isn't so miffed that the Presidio Trust rejected his museum proposal that he's avoiding the city altogether.

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Fundraiser

North Beach Citizens will have its annual spring fundraising dinner from 6 to 9 p.m. Sunday, April 12, at SS Peter and Paul's Church, 666 Filbert St., San Francisco. For information, visit www.northbeachcitizens.org/events/spring-event



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