**St. Alban’s Rich History Draws Attention**

Katherine Wilk  
kwilk@radford.edu

On a hill overlooking the New River, a couple of miles from Radford University, are some buildings that used to house troubled minds. The abandoned dormitories and offices that used to be the Saint Alban’s psychiatric center now house rumors and graffiti. The patients are gone, but fascination with the place remains.

RU students inside the Recreation, Parks and Tourism department are leading interested parties on tours of what some say is a haunted spot. They’re hoping to stop the destruction caused by those interested in the building’s past while helping new owner Tim Gregory finance restorations.

The group is eager to remain involved in the project that steals their Saturday mornings, giving enthusiastic visitors a tour of what some describe as the Pulaski haunt. They’ve memorized the history, reciting dates and plans to anyone ready to listen. And above all, they see Gregory as nothing less than amazing.

Gregory was a patient at the hospital when he was 13 years old, so he could receive treatment for his Asberger’s syndrome. He described himself as fortunate and “spoiled rotten” during his stay at the hospital.

“Me and my wife got a chance to look at the building and I knew we needed to get it because they wanted to tear it down, so I couldn’t let that happen,” Gregory said. “So it’s not exactly like buying the home place but it’s as close as you can get.”

He purchased the property for $500,000 back in 2008 from an RU Real Estate Foundation auction. The sale also included the nearby King House, which was the family home of Dr. J.C. King after his family moved out of the center.

Gregory hopes to turn the property into a conference center with 80 guest rooms, several classes devoted to healing, lectures, motivational speakers and offices for those involved in holistic medicine. He anticipates drawing visitors in with the building’s rich history.

St. Alban’s was originally opened between 1892 and 1911 as the St. Alban’s Boy’s School. Five years later, the hospital opened its doors with the help of King.

Patients described it as a peaceful place where they were healed holistically and without medication. Gregory often warns those seeking the ghosts and spirits they’ve heard rumors about to book a tour and not break into St. Alban’s. He occasionally haunts the buildings himself, late at night, protecting his one-time home from vandals and nosey students.

Gregory sometimes catches students creeping into the abandoned building and on occasion has restrained trespassers until authorities could arrive. He jokes now about the fear he caused one young man who was so frightened by Gregory’s appearance in a dark room, long beard and all, that he urinated himself.

Catching those who break in is just a hobby, but the big picture is his dream of restoration. Vandals have caused unbelievable damage. After the building sat abandoned for six years, it undoubtedly needs a great deal of restoration.

“[We’re] having these tours so people know what we’re doing out here,” Gregory said.  “Because they go back and tell their friends that we’re actually fixing it up, it’s not falling down. That’s the most important steps we’re taking. It’s just getting information out to lighten the place up.”

During the time when RU owned the property, it was left unused and asking for trouble. RU once made use of the property, allowing art students to graffiti and damage parts of the building for displays. It still holds the remaining projects inside many of the rooms. However, many tour guides point out the destruction is hard to separate from the vandalism that occurred afterwards.

“It’s such a historical building and I don’t think people realize that, because I didn’t realize that until I started getting involved with it,” said CEO Bobbie Wolfe. “When you damage it, it just costs more money for [Gregory] to put back into the building and it’s just not a good thing to do.”

Through the crude spray paint, holes in the walls, broken staircases, uneven floors, shattered windows and overgrown landscapes tour guides, visitors and volunteers see Gregory’s dream clearly. Even the creeping vines seek solace inside the walls of St. Alban’s.

Grand staircases, square footage and a maze of rooms keep their eye on the light at the end of the tunnel.

**Hidden Treasures**

St. Alban’s is full of abandoned wonders. Several columns support the roof and balconies of the buildings. During renovations they were covered and protected with Styrofoam, keeping many of them in perfect condition today. Only a handful have been lost to age.

During the transformations over the years, a set of skylights were also covered up in the main sitting room in one of the buildings. Drop ceilings were installed in most of the structures, lowering many ceiling heights and covering up the buildings treasures.

**The Cage**

What most would assume is a rooftop patio is what tour guides refer to as “The Cage.” An area atop on of the buildings of St. Alban’s was caged off to allow patients in the closed wards their daily outdoor time without fear of endangerment.

Gregory plans to remove the cage and replace the broken tile and add planters, giving future visitors a place to drink coffee during the morning.  
Alcohol Unit

St. Alban’s was constantly referred to as “a place of healing” for those who needed it. It wasn’t a stranger to many celebrities — Johnny Cash was rumored to have booked a room in St. Alban’s alcohol unit but later refused his stay.

The unit had its own entrance behind the facility where, according to nurses, many limousines would drop off patients.

**Patients**

One patient of St. Alban’s who was under the direct care of King found herself at odds with the hospital’s founder. She was at the center for anorexia and obsessive compulsive disorder. Before breakfast each day, the girl would have her room in order and King would mess it up while she ate. He supposedly did it to keep her on her toes and encourage her to push her anger outside her body.

**Tim’s Story**

Gregory explained to the tourists his appreciation for King’s facility. He would act up when he learned of his release. As the youngest patient, Gregory would pretend to run away from the grounds of St. Alban’s. However he would take his time and practically walk just to ensure he would be caught.

After hearing of his release on another occasion, Gregory ran screaming and slammed his head into a hallway vending machine, knocking himself out. His determination to stay within the walls of St. Alban’s is comical to him now.

Gregory’s fascination never falters. As the class takes tourists through, Gregory delves into the building memory first and guides guests through the web of hallways. His paths almost always intersect the students and he won’t hesitate to inform visitors of his future plans for each room of the center.

**Visitors**

Curious minds aren’t the only ones seeking the tours. Nurses and other workers from St. Alban’s past have booked tours with Tim and his guides. One accompanied a tour and did not hesitate to point out flaws in the building’s history.

One nurse had tears in her eyes as she noticed the overwhelming amount of destruction within the building.

The rush of a ghost story will still draw in visitors. One couple came to St. Alban’s to record their findings as amateur ghost hunters, wandering from the set path of the tour and taking in every inch of the building.

They aren’t the only one looking for ghosts. A small child clung to an iPhone running a ghost finder APP into the electroshock therapy room.

Gregory sees a different side of the paranormal aspect of St. Alban’s.

“Do I believe there’s a lot of spirits in St. Alban’s? Yeah, I do. Do I believe there’s monsters—reach-out-and-get-you kind of things going on? No, I don’t go there too much,” Gregory said. “But I do believe there’s a lot of spirits here… It was a place of healing for a long, long time. If I went to the other side, I’d probably want to go to a place like this and hang out too.”

**Electroshock Therapy**

One technique that was used on many patients during operations at St. Alban’s was electroshock therapy. Gregory received 21 shock treatments over the course of his stay. The treatment was said to help Gregory’s condition by inducing grand-mal seizures that changed the way his brain processed functions.

Electroshock therapy was given a bad rap after the film “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest” portrayed the use of forced shock treatments on patients, said one nurse as she explained the technique and reasons behind the treatment at St. Alban’s.

The center will be renamed the St. Alban’s Center for Research and Enlightenment. As those who ventured into the buildings returned from their journey, most felt the need to step in and get involved.

“It’s such a historical building and people don’t realize that—I didn’t until I started getting involved,” Wolfe said.

After the university failed to do anything with the building, students stepped in with hopes to make St. Alban’s a vital part of the community once again. They encourage others to help make sure the building is appreciated and preserved, taking the history to heart.

That’s exactly what this project is doing as it pulls at the heartstrings of the community.

“[A maintenance man who worked on the property for 30 years] cried so much… because they had to leave the building,” Gregory said. “And if it meant that much to the people who worked there, you can imagine what it meant to people who came here to heal. And I get stories everywhere you go if you bring up St. Alban’s—whether it’s Wal-Mart, Lowes, wherever—everybody’s got a story—a good story about St. Alban’s.”

Published Nov. 11, 2010 in The Tartan