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HEADLINE: **A Developer Goes Home To Tackle A New Project**

BYLINE: By MICHELLE M. MURPHY

BODY:

FOR the last 13 years, Rosanne Haggerty has been transforming ramshackle, historic buildings in New York City into genteel, safe and affordable housing for people on the fringes of society.

Her nonprofit organization, Common Ground Community, has been featured on "60 Minutes" and honored by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, which in 2001 awarded her one of its \$500,000 "genius grants."

Now Ms. Haggerty, a West Hartford native, is poised to come home and renovate a vacant, vintage building in downtown Hartford, which is less than five miles from the house she grew up in and where her mother still lives. The building is also just around the corner from another landmark in her life: the site of the now-demolished Hartford Hotel, a single-room-occupancy building where she, her parents and her seven siblings would help serve dinner after Mass each Sunday during the 1970's.

"There is the sense of a circle," Ms. Haggerty, 43, said. "I am just thrilled to be doing this project. It's a real privilege."

The 77-year-old structure at 410 Asylum Street was donated to her organization in September, and Ms. Haggerty intends to restore it and create 120 units of supportive housing for low-income and homeless people. That is, if the city of Hartford will let her.

City officials have been hesitant about her plans to develop the building, which sits on the edge of Bushnell Park, the gleaming Capitol dome looming in the background. They say that her project, while noble, is happening in the wrong place at the wrong time for a city teetering on the verge of a long-awaited renaissance.

"That location is one of the prime pieces of real estate in Hartford," said Matthew Hennessey, the chief of staff for Mayor Eddie Perez. "But there's a question about whether transitional supportive housing at that location is the highest and best use of that property for the city's tax base. The mayor has to look out for the best interests of all the residents of the city of Hartford, and the thing that's in their best interest is building the tax base so we can pay for schools that work and streets that are clean and safe."

The concept of supportive housing, which provides stringently screened tenants with on-site job training, medical care and social services, has gained momentum in the last decade as an effective and cost-efficient solution to homelessness. Common Ground, which is based in Manhattan, is widely recognized and respected as a preeminent supportive housing developer. Indeed, Ms. Haggerty's initial project with Common Ground was the Times Square Hotel on and 43rd Street near Eighth Avenue, the largest such building in the country, according to the Corporation for Supportive Housing, with 652 efficiency units, several floors of social service providers and a Ben & Jerry's and a Starbucks on the ground floor.

Ms. Haggerty was barely 30 years old when she became convinced that the fledgling concept of supportive housing could work at the historic, bankrupt Times Square Hotel. She formed Common Ground in 1991 to bring her idea to fruition -- and she conceded that, with a 3-year-old son, braces on her teeth and the same clothes she had worn since graduating from Amherst College in 1982, she must have made an unlikely champion for such an ambitious undertaking. But Ms. Haggerty said she felt called to the project; since completing her senior thesis on the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, she had considered her "education an obligation, not a possession."

After working seven years for Brooklyn Catholic Charities in housing development, she knew her way around the world of nonprofit real-estate development. She knocked on the doors of colleagues and professional contacts and cobbled together enough money with state and federal incentives for low-income housing, historic preservation, low-interest loans and some private bridge financing to make her vision a reality.

Since then, Common Ground has developed five more buildings in New York City, housing more than 1,300 people, and is working on other projects in London, Tokyo and Newburgh, N.Y. Near each of the completed projects, crime has dropped, property values have risen and the buildings have saved the city money, according to statistics provided to Common Ground by various city agencies. Supportive housing costs about \$10,000 to \$13,000 a year, according to Common Ground, while a bed in a shelter, a city prison or a hospital bed can cost about \$23,000, \$63,000 and up to \$600,000, respectively.

"I commend what she's doing; I have no problems with her," said Martin Kenny, the developer of Trumbull on the Park, a luxury apartment building going up at Bushnell Park in Hartford. "But the issue is not with her and the quality of her work. The issue is locating homeless housing in the park area at this stage in time. As somebody who's investing \$38 million in a project on the park up the street, I think it's a great idea, but in the wrong location.

Mr. Hennessey agreed.

"There's no question about the quality of the work they do, he said. "The program does a good job, a very good job of taking blighted properties and rehabbing them into viable and well-maintained properties in the context of New York City. But does it have to be at this location?"

It does, according to Ms. Haggerty, because the price of the building at 410 Asylum was right. The building was donated by Milton and Betty Ruth Hollander, Stamford business owners who also own the building at 370 Asylum, which has commercial tenants. But the building at 410, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, has been vacant since 1995.

The Hollanders said that one of their visions for the building had been to turn it into a multi-use structure, with a restaurant and parking included, that would be joined via elevated walkway over High Street with their building at 370 Asylum. They said that their frustration and inability to get the permits required to develop the property converged with their discovery of Common Ground.

"I'd heard about her, met her, and we got totally turned on," Mrs. Hollander said. "We were persuaded by what she's already accomplished. So many times you hear of people who have a dream that they wish they could do something about. But she did it. She had this dream but she also has the ability and the force and the drive to attract people and she does it with this serenity about her. She's brilliant."

Richard Tynan, who mediates disputes between landlords and tenants for Superior Court in Hartford, said: "To me, she's the most significant person in housing in the country. She has a comprehensive program that offers innovative solutions to homelessness. Her organization is just amazing. You've just got to see her buildings. They are beautiful places. I've never been able to afford to stay in a hotel with lobbies like these.

"In my opinion, she works miracles, and Hartford is overdue for one."

Common Ground planned to begin its zoning application process early next year. If all goes well, said Mike Skrebutenas, Common Ground's director in Connecticut, construction on 410 Asylum Street could begin by March 2005, with tenants moving in by May 2006. He estimated that the project could cost up to \$17 million and would be financed with state, federal and private money.

But that is a big if. The group must first obtain variances on zoning requirements for parking at that site, or a special permit to turn the commercial property into residential space. For her part, Ms. Haggerty said she was accustomed to the kind of controversy that her project has created among some in the city.

"Very rarely does a neighborhood throw its arms out and say: 'Great! You're going to bring affordable housing into our midst,'" she said. "It's very understandable for neighbors to be concerned about any type of social housing project. They have questions about security, management, the construction project itself.

"These are questions I'd ask in my own neighborhood. We pay lots of attention to security. We have a very high bar in terms of selection of tenants. This is not institutional housing. We have a long waiting list of people who want to get into our buildings. That's heartbreaking, but the good news is it means we can be very selective."

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GRAPHIC: Photos: Top, a vacant building at 410 Asylum Street in downtown Hartford, where Rosanne Haggerty and Mike Skrebutenas of Common Ground are looking to create housing for low-income and homeless people. The city, however, may have other plans for the site. Above and left, the interior of the building, which the nonprofit group is planning to convert into 120 units by May 2006. (Photographs by George Ruhe for The New York Times)