Construction begins on new mental health treatment facility

Hernando Today photo by HAYLEY MATHIS



From left to right, Al West, Bill Cosgray, Mary Woods and Loralee West celebrate the groundbreaking ceremony Tuesday afternoon for Westbridge Community Services, a new treatment facility that will be located on Grove Road.

By TONY HOLT | Hernando Today

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BROOKSVILLE - Al West stood at the dais and reminisced for a moment.

It was an accidental homecoming — but a welcome one.

The co-founder of Westbridge Community Services is opening a new treatment facility in his hometown. The 11-acre property will be built a short distance from State Road 50 near the Suncoast Parkway.

He said CEO Mary Ryan Woods "went all over Florida" looking for the best place to build a new community.

Brooksville was the best choice, said Woods.

"There's a skilled workforce here," she said. "There are lots of good health professionals around."

West's partner in the creation of Westbridge was his wife, Loralee West. Both credited the facility for saving their son's life.

"We know our son wouldn't be alive today if it weren't for Westbridge," she said. "We're saving lives one at a time … and we're very proud of that."

A groundbreaking ceremony took place Tuesday afternoon at the new location at 7300 Grove Road. New officers were introduced. Speeches came from those who have been directly impacted by mental illness.

Westbridge is a treatment facility that, according to its mission statement, is "family founded and family centered."

It addresses two major medical issues — co-occurring mental illness and substance use disorders.

"Sometimes they come together and when they come together, it can get a lot tougher," said Al West.

Rita Tice, a board member of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), has a son who was diagnosed with Asberger's syndrome, bi-polar disorder and schizophrenic tendencies, she said.

He now lives independently in Kentucky. She worries about him, but is proud of his progress, she said.

Tice leaned on others who had children, spouses and other loved ones suffering from mental illnesses.
Westbridge embodies that kind of support system, she said.

Tice added more punch to her speech by rattling off several statistics showing how often mental illnesses and addictions are overlooked by the general public.

Roughly 3,700 people died on Sept. 11, 2001. By comparison, 2,700 commit suicide in Florida each year, said Tice.

More than $50 million has been donated for research for mental disorders while more than $100 billion has been donated for cancer research. Twenty times as many people are affected by mental illness compared to cancer, she said.

The Wests, Woods and Tice talked about the medical impact of Westbridge, but county officials also are weighing the economic impact.

Valarie Pianta, a spokeswoman with the Hernando County Office of Business Development, said Westbridge will provide up to 40 full-time and part-time jobs. Recruitment will begin in July.

The open positions will include medical professionals, counselors, maintenance and administrative staff.

Westbridge is expected to open in December.

The facility will include two buildings with a combined square footage of 20,000. There will be a two-story residence, a pool house and an administrative building.

Brooksville was chosen because the community is the ideal size for a treatment center. It offers the right amount of resources and has proximity to the airport and several major highways, said Westbridge Chief Operating Officer Jonathan Routhier.