

WE'VE FINALLY GOT THE KEYS



SECURE: Bryan Wardley and Rachel Faulkner outside St Margaret's Institute

Picture: Antony Moore Order No. 310308923 oxfordmail.co.uk/photosales

By Fran Bardsley

Community buys centre lease

THE future of a North Oxford community centre is safe "for the foreseeable future" after residents clubbed together to buy its lease.

Eight hundred people contributed to a £500,000 appeal to buy the 999-year lease of St Margaret's Institute, from Oxford University's St John's College.

The sale secures the long-term future of the centre, in Polstead Road.

Appeal chairman Ben Simpson said: "It's extraordinary.

"We raised the last few thousand pounds just days before we needed to give St John's the cheque.

"The local community now has this wonderful building for the foreseeable future.

"This was a heart-warming example of how an appeal for an enormous sum of money can energise the whole community.

"I can't express my gratitude enough for the support from so many hundreds of people."

The fundraising campaign was launched in March 2004 after the college agreed to sell the lease for £400,000 — the remaining £100,000 is to be spent refurbishing the building.

Appeal treasurer Bryan Wardley said: "We are thrilled. I am also very relieved because it has been a hard slog — it's just like finishing a university degree."

More than 30 groups use the building each week. Activities range from children's parties to Balkan dancing.

Mr Wardley said the centre filled a gap between Jericho and the Ferry Centre in North Oxford, and served a population of around 8,000.

He said: "It is at the heart of the community.

"The great thing about this appeal, and raising this money, is that it has enabled the older members of the community to amalgamate very strongly with people who have moved into the 2,000 new homes which have been built."

Throughout the appeal, a total of 32 fundraising events were held, and 100 people pledged £1,000 each.

Mr Wardley said: "Lots of people have come to our events.

"People have had a real chance to get to know each other.

"I think it has helped to build the community and make it stronger."

The appeal was backed by Oxford City Council's North area committee, which contributed £63,000 towards the total.

The lease has been held in trust by St Margaret's Church, in St Margaret's Road.

Previously the centre was on a short-term, commercial rate lease which would have made it unviable for a voluntary committee to run for the community.

Nearby residents and friends of the institute contributed more than 75 per cent of the money raised in the appeal.

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