

Posted on Wed, Oct. 29, 2008

## Germantown Y beset by woes

By Vernon Clark

Inquirer Staff Writer

A sign above the rear entrance to the Germantown YMCA proclaims it "a place to become somebody again."

For 80 years, generations of Philadelphians in the city's northwestern communities have been going to the imposing red-brick building on Greene Street near Cheltenham Avenue to learn to swim, to work up a sweat, and, in rough times, to eat and sleep.

That began to change dramatically on a Saturday in July, when a pressurized pipe in the sprinkler system ruptured on the second floor of the YMCA's recreational section. The water reached a depth of about four inches in the front half of the 100,000-square-foot building.

The flood - Manuel Ayala, chief executive officer of the Germantown YMCA, calls it "the event" - forced the closure of the four-lane swimming pool, gymnasium, weight room, racquetball and handball courts, fitness center, locker rooms, and lounges. Programs including after-school and senior exercise had to be suspended.

More than three months later, nothing in the deluged section is up and running yet. The damage has been estimated at \$1.5 million, and the YMCA has filed a claim with its insurance carrier. But AIG, which almost collapsed last month in the national financial meltdown, has been slow to cover the loss, said Ayala, who has hired a private insurance adjuster to help speed the process.

The hard luck didn't end with the deluge. Two boilers that heat the recreational and residential sides, where 128 homeless men are sheltered, broke down.

Repairs have been made to the boiler on the residential side, but the unit needs to be replaced, Ayala said. The other is beyond fixing; it was cannibalized to keep the other operating.

The malfunctioning boilers and ruptured pipe have added up to "devastating" trouble for the YMCA, Ayala said as he gave a recent tour of the flood-ravaged areas.

Because the Y is closed on Sundays, the water had poured in unnoticed until staffers returned that Monday morning. Hundreds of square feet of carpet and tiles, baseboards, and walls had to be removed to prevent mold and other damage. The water also brought down some ceilings and light fixtures.

Stepping into a room where several bookcases and piles of books were on the floor, Ayala said, "This was our library. We lost most of the books."

He could not say when the recreational section would reopen, although he aims to "make part of the building operational by February."

A disaster-relief fund for the YMCA has been established at the nearby PNC Bank branch on Cheltenham Avenue, and several local groups have contributed, he said.

Closing the recreational side could affect the residential part, where homeless men have been offered single-room occupancy since 1990.

There are few places in Philadelphia that offer shelter exclusively to homeless men, according to Herbert Wetzel, executive director of housing and community development for the Office of the City Council President. The Germantown YMCA, he said, meets a special need.

"Apparently, it's a real nice program," Wetzel said, "and nobody gets out of line."

Pete Fleming, 38, a recovering substance abuser who has been a resident for the last seven months, credits the Y with improving his life.

"I owe a lot to my higher power and the YMCA of Germantown," he said. "It's been a huge blessing to live here."

Memberships and fees help pay to house men like Fleming. But the closing threatens that money source.

Since he was hired in September 2007, Ayala has campaigned to increase membership, which jumped from 1,500 to 6,000 just before the flood. As a courtesy, the memberships are being temporarily honored at YMCAs of Philadelphia and Vicinity - an

umbrella group to which the independent Germantown Y does not belong. But that agreement, Ayala said, expires at the end of November.

For recreation, there is no nearby alternative. Four years ago, the YWCA on Germantown Avenue closed due to lack of funding.

Founded in 1871, the first Germantown YMCA was on Germantown Avenue near Haines Street. When it moved to Greene Street in 1928 - a Packard garage was next door - it drew visitors from Mount Airy, Chestnut Hill and East Falls.

Curnel Bridges, a YMCA board member, recalled the early grandeur of the building, with its wood-trimmed lobby, modern gymnasium, and brightly tiled pool.

"I remember the glory days and the trophy cases," Bridges, 69, said. "I have so many great memories of playing basketball and swimming."

He began attending in the early 1960s. "During the '50s, no blacks were allowed there," said Bridges, who became a full member in the 1970s after the first black director was hired.

"The racquetball courts were some of the best in the area, if not the best. Some of the best racquetball players in the city came there," Bridges said. "Even people who don't live in Germantown understand the importance of this YMCA."

For Ayala, getting the famed institution back on its feet is paramount.

"This has been one of the greatest challenges of my career," said Ayala, who worked previously at a Y in Chicago.

"A big motivation for me and the staff is knowing there are so many people that call this YMCA home."