



The Firehouse before Ridgway's streets were paved in 2017, with its iconic fire truck parked out front.

Firehouse Project brings life to  
community philanthropist's vision

# The Hearth of Ridgway

BY TANYA ISHIKAWA

A hearth is defined not only as a brick, stone, or concrete area in front of a fireplace, but also as the heart of a home and a vital, creative center.

The soon-to-open restaurant in the renovated Firehouse building is true to its name, The Hearth.

Located in the heart of Ridgway, the restaurant with attached event spaces, outdoor areas, greenhouse, and residences was imagined by the late Patrick O'Leary as an essential Ridgway gathering place.





A hearth is defined ... as the heart of a home and a vital, creative center.

In a June 2020 letter, O'Leary wrote: Over the past several years our owner-development team has been envisioning a development project that will give renewed life and new purpose to the Old Firehouse as the centerpiece of our adaptive re-use, commercial/residential mixed-use project. We are dedicated to a faithful rehabilitation and restoration of the "old stone house" walls, preserving/respecting the iconic profile and cupola of the Firehouse's eastern elevation and also preserving the adjacent beloved sculpture garden green space, "Lucy's Garden."

This summer's rebirth of the Ridgway Town Hall and Fire Station starts a new chapter for

the building, which has been the location of diverse uses over its 126 years near the corner of North Lena and Clinton streets. When the new residents move in and the first customers visit, one of O'Leary's dreams for the community will come true through preserving local heritage and invigorating the economy.

**HOME TO FIRE DEPARTMENT FOR 90 YEARS**

The Old Firehouse, as many locals call the building at the center of the development, is probably most famous as the one-room, red schoolhouse in the original "True Grit,"

filmed in 1968 and starring John Wayne and several other notable Hollywood legends. The motion picture company actually built the bell tower, high atop the landmark, to make it appear more authentic as a late 1800s school.

The building was originally owned by the Bank of Ridgway, which it traded for another building with the town government in 1898. For two-thirds of the building's history, it mainly housed Ridgway's Town Hall and Fire Station.

In 1899, a second story was added and leased by the Centurian Lodge #100 of the Knights of Pythius. This was a local chapter of the first fraternal order chartered by a U.S. Congress-



Most of the historic Firehouse's wooden ceiling boards were saved, refurbished, and reinstalled in the ceiling. (Photo by Eric Ming)

sional Act, to support charitable, benevolent, and social activities. In 1901, the Town Hall was renovated with a new ceiling, storerooms for firefighter outfits, and roof repairs. The floor was finished for dancing and a stage built. Ten years later, the first film ever shown in Ridgway was inside the Town Hall.

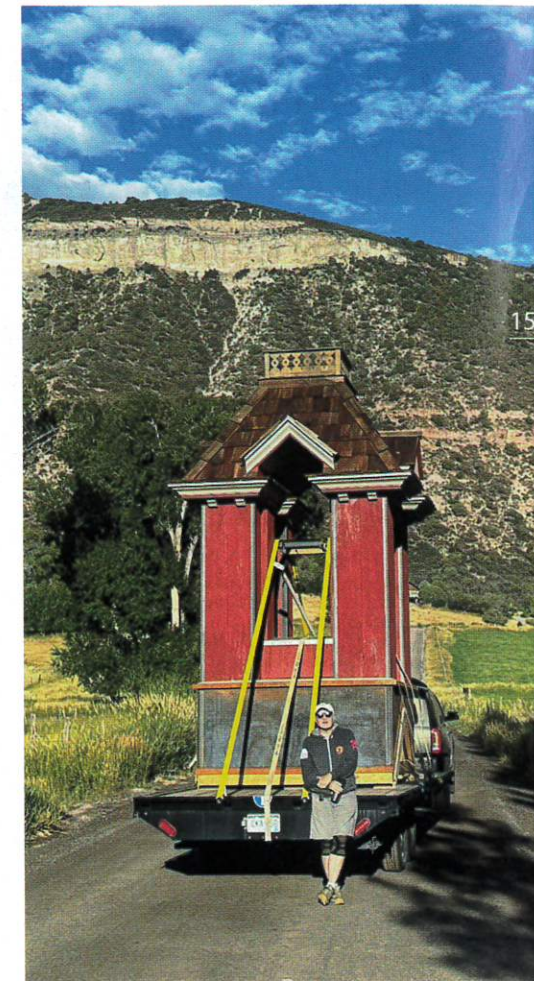
The Knights of Pythius agreed to move out in 1917, so the building could be remodeled for use by the Ridgway High School. The students and teachers used the first floor for a gymnasium and the second floor was shared by the town's officials and classes from 1920 to 1937.

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At left: Left to right, Marti O'Leary, Lucy Boody, Deedee Decker, and Patrick O'Leary pose for the groundbreaking of the Firehouse development project in June 2022. (Courtesy photo)

Above: The greenhouse on the second floor is behind the bell tower of the historic Firehouse. The third-floor decks have great views of Hartwell Park and the Cimarrons. (Photo by Eric Ming)



Patrick O'Leary stands next to the bell tower along the route of transport from the shop of Scott Ridders, who restored it, to the Firehouse in August 2023. (Courtesy photo)



An artist's rendering of the Firehouse project before construction got underway. The walls of the second and third floors of the connected building ended up being covered in rustic beetle-kill wood, unlike in this picture. (Courtesy image)

About 40 years later, in 1978, the Town Hall moved into a mobile home next door. The fire department remained until 1988 when it moved to a new building, next to a new town hall. At that point, local resident Peter Pitts bought the historic building and used it for storage.

In 1997, Pitts sold the building to Michael McCullough and Joni McCullough who had plans of turning it into an art gallery. Michael had lived in Ridgway since 1972, supporting his work as a sculptor through waiting tables, working construction, and founding and operating a trash pickup service in Ouray. Joni had been a director of emergency med-

ical services, EMT, deputy coroner, and town clerk, who loved art and gardening.

The building was renamed Ridgway Firehouse Sculpture and Gallery, and Michael began producing the iconic sculptures he became known for, many commissioned by Ron and Joyce Allred for Mountain Village Plaza and by Dee Dee Decker for Ridgway. But, Michael is probably best known for his first sculpture, the massive bald eagle clutching a salmon in the Firehouse's front yard.

By 2003, Michael was living alone in the building and his new partner, Ludy Boody, moved in. While he continued to sculpt on one side of the studio, Boody worked on her

fine art painting, sculpting, and fiber art on the other.

"I opened a little studio store where people could watch us work and buy our goods. I was determined to turn the vacant abandoned lot around us into something beautiful," she recalled. "The front yard became a little jewel. I thrived in the garden and people were welcome to visit. Elementary school kids would come for tours."

The garden was a mix of vines, trees, shrubs, plants on wheeled garden boxes, hand-sculpted fairies, and benches. Boody redesigned the garden from year to year as her creativity led her in new directions.

#### FROM MICHAEL'S PLACE TO PAT'S PLACE

While living at the Firehouse, Lucy and Michael advanced Ridgway's arts community in many ways. They helped found PARC (Public Art Ridgway CO) that initiated Michael's vision of having sculptures peppered throughout town for the public to enjoy, as well as creating Alley Poems and Alley Art, a whimsical outdoor gallery of words and illustrations found along Ridgway's alleys. They were also key advocates of Ridgway's designation as a Colorado Creative District, an initiative that promotes artists and creative entrepreneurs.

The community lost Michael to cancer in 2016. One year later, Patrick and Marti O'Leary purchased the Firehouse, motivated to preserve the building and reinvigorate the downtown block. Not only was Patrick a friend of Michael's but he was a history major in college and a longtime history buff, as well as someone who had contributed in many ways to the community since purchasing a home in Loghill Village in 2005.

"Marti and Pat have been very gracious to me during the transition of ownership. They have included me in many aspects of the development's planning," Boody explained. "I'm really embracing this project. It could

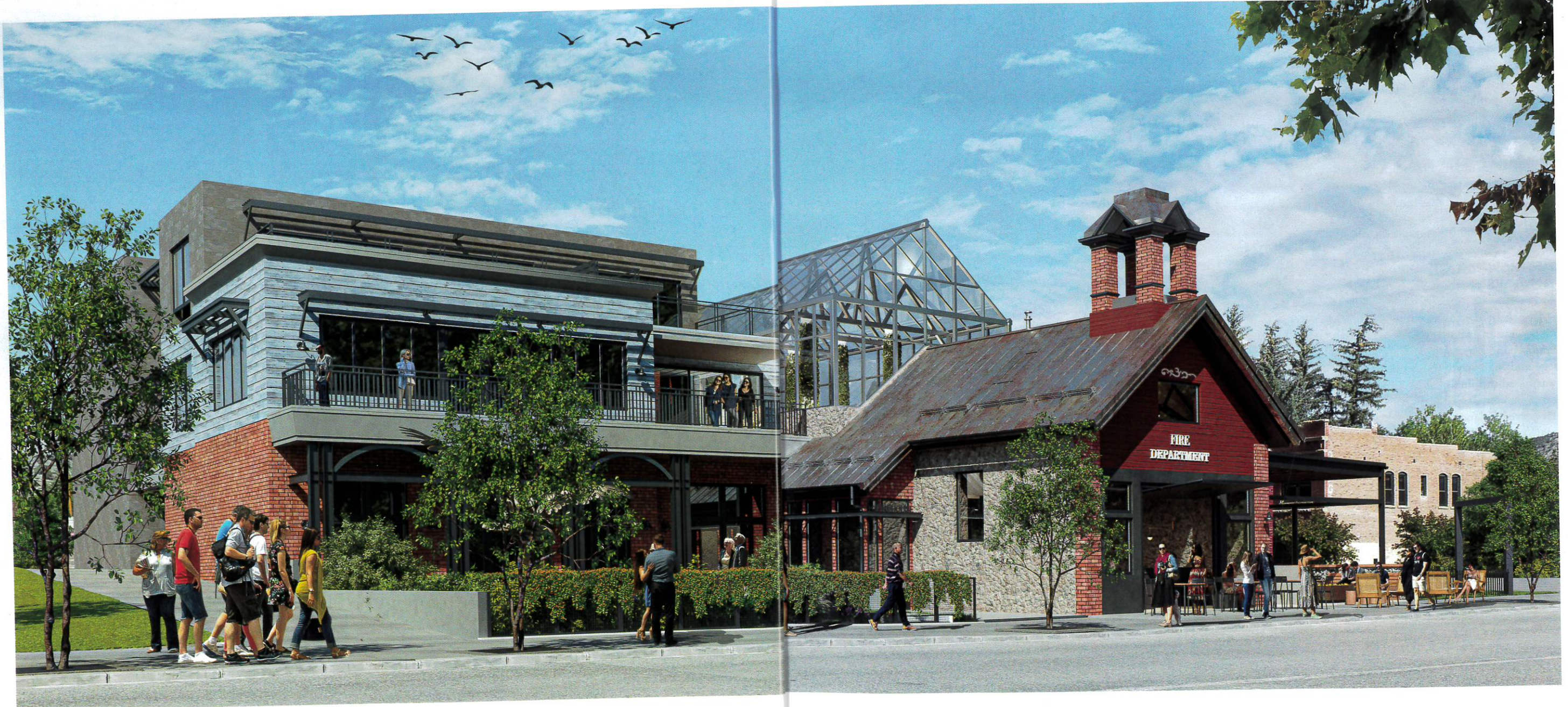
have gone a myriad of other ways. The community is fortunate to have Marti and Pat as custodians of the Firehouse."

"Pat really was the heart and soul, engaged in every part of this development. He crossed every t and dotted every i, and really went the extra mile for all the details," she added.

Lucy's Garden is being revived in the 2,000-square-foot front yard on the building's south side. Last autumn, she and Marti selected plants, that were nurtured over the winter in the O'Leary's greenhouse on Loghill Mesa.

"With the rebirth of the garden, I'm hoping

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that it creates a sanctuary-type space where people can sit in the beauty of flowers and shrubs that grow here, and be embraced by the color and the texture," Lucy said.

Michael's beloved bronze eagle, known as "The Catch," will be placed in the front yard on the north side. That yard is becoming Pat's Place, a 2,000-square-foot, landscaped outdoor dining area with pub food and drink service from a restaurant window. The vision is for a year-round hangout for people to meet, talk, play games, and enjoy live performances.

Had cancer not taken Patrick away from his family and community in March this year, Pat's Place would have had a different name, but for certain, it would have been his place. He would have been a fixture there — conversing energetically with neighbors, excitedly watching baseball and basketball games, enthusiastically applauding local performers, and dreaming up new ways for Ridgway to shine.

Though the historic jail behind the Firehouse was moved stone by numbered stone on 95 pallets to the Ouray County Ranch History Museum, the fire truck will return to park next to the building. If someone as patient and proud of that truck as Pat can be found, it will continue to make appearances at parades and other community events.

### THE SHOWMAN, THE DREAMER, THE SERVANT

Patrick Bernard O'Leary, as described by his friends and family, was an avid baseball fan, loved to play basketball, and watch college and high school basketball games. He was raised in Illinois, and began his lifelong career in commercial real estate in Chicago. He served for more than 20 years as chairman and board member of Chicago's Jane Addams Hull House Association, a resource center for immigrants.

The Ouray County community came to know Pat for his love of music and showing off for an audience. He excelled at singing and acting, and learned to play piano at 50 years old. He and Marti joined the newly founded Sherbino Theater Company in 2018.

Also known for his commitment to community service, he was a longtime board member, event volunteer, and top donor for the Ridgway Chautauqua Society, the non-profit that operates the Sherbino Theater, 610 Arts Collective, and Courtyard at 610. He was a dedicated member of the Log Hill Fire

Department, and he and Marti joined Barthold and Cat Lichtenbelt to start the Ouray County Response Fund through the Telluride Foundation, to provide a financial safety net for residents in need.

"When Pat saw the for sale sign in front of the Firehouse, he said, 'Oh man, I think we should do something here.' He didn't want someone from New Jersey buying it and knocking it down," Marti recalled.

Fast-forward to March 2020 and as managing member of Firehouse Investment Real Estate, LLC, Pat led an investment and development team in turning the Firehouse block into a "hospitality complex." With the

assistance of local architect John Baskfield, development plans and zoning variances were approved by the Town of Ridgway.

"Once our vision is realized, we believe the Old Ridgway Firehouse will bring substantial long-term economic and social benefit to the Town of Ridgway and across all of Ouray County," Pat wrote.

The Ouray County Board of County Commissioners awarded the Ridgway Town Hall and Fire Station building with the designation of Ouray County Historic Landmark in June 2020. Both that historic status, as well as plans to integrate workforce housing into the project, helped bring in minor but much-

needed grants to help fund construction.

"I think it's now the coolest thing on the Western Slope with its different elements. It's so unique. I'm excited about the uniqueness," said Marti in April this year as the completion of the project neared.

### IT TAKES A VILLAGE (AND A LOT OF PROBLEM SOLVING)

The list of local and regional companies working on the Firehouse Project is long, from the masons to electricians, carpenters, plumbers, engineers, and others. To name them all would be difficult, especially now

that Pat is not here to cross-check the list to make sure all are included.

Bray Architecture, located in Boulder, Colorado, has been one of the firms most involved in all areas of the project from architecture to interior design and structural planning. Specializing in restaurants and mixed-use developments, the firm does 20 to 30 projects annually across the nation.

"This is a big project. Its complex, utilizing the existing Firehouse, wedging it in on anything but a flat site. Then there's the CenturyLink tower," said architect Jim Bray. "Once we were under construction, I was down there every month. Prior to that,

I was down on a quarterly basis as needed. The client group meets on a regular basis, every week."

Preserving the historic building was much more challenging than expected. The massive, thick walls and simple appearance, typical of Romanesque architecture, were not symmetrical and had cracks dating back to at least the 1960s.

"As we got into the construction more, the building was just not square. Some walls were eight inches over plumb. The tops of walls were all over the place, more than a foot off from one side to another," he remembered.

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An artist's rendering of the restaurant and the outdoor event center on the north side of the building. The lawn at far right in the photo is now planned to be a casual outdoor pub called Pat's Place. (Courtesy image)





The building includes four one-bedroom workforce apartments with carports. The two third-floor residences each have a two-car garage on the ground level, accessible by elevator. (Photo by Eric Ming)



in replying, "Certainly, Patrick, and I would have said that six months ago as well."

"Patrick had a really good way of putting people at ease and making them comfortable. He went out of his way to do that," he commented. "He really enjoyed the process as something new, like a kid, always hungry to learn more about it and dive into it deeper."

#### SEEDS OF INSPIRATION

One of the most visionary elements of the project is the 1,400-square-foot greenhouse built on the second floor above the historic building, behind the dining area and above

"The system utilizes all the surface area very efficiently, growing a whole raised bed of plants in a three-foot by three-foot footprint."

— Sam Nafziger

the large kitchen. Named The Harvest at The Old Firehouse, the greenhouse will be managed and operated by Pat's family friend Sam Nafziger, supported by a team of propagators and harvesters.

Nafziger spent much of his childhood in Ouray, but went to high school in Boulder

where he took vocational training in the culinary arts. Returning to live in Ouray County, he has worked in landscaping, stone masonry, horticulture, floriculture, and arboriculture during the day, at night cooking in local restaurants including more than 12 years in head chef and sous chef positions. Much of his inspiration, especially for growing organic heirloom vegetables, came from Horton Nash, the previous owner at Buckhorn Gardens in Colona.

The idea for the greenhouse was hatched when Pat saw a greenhouse with vertical aeroponic towers above a restaurant in the RiNo district of Denver. He contacted Altius Farms

and owner Sally Herbert jumped on board as an advisor for the Ridgway greenhouse.

The tall, airy greenhouse will supply The Hearth and the event center clients, as well as farmer's markets and other buyers. It will be filled with 44 vertical growing systems, each able to grow 40 plants at a time. "The system utilizes all the surface area very efficiently, growing a whole raised bed of plants in a three-foot by three-foot footprint," Nafziger explained.

The greenhouse will specialize in heirloom varieties of various vegetables. Lettuce, braising greens, edible flowers, and leafy vegetables

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Produce will be grown in vertical towers, similar to those at JFS Altius Farms LLC in Denver, the inspiration for the greenhouse project. (Photo courtesy of JFS Altius Farms, LLC)



Engineering stormwater drainage and the construction along the alleyways were complicated puzzles to solve. Saving and repurposing various elements from the original property, such as the ceiling boards, gates, and fencing, were also challenges.

"I feel like those are the fabric of the town, and saving those and relocating them in different ways has been interesting," he explained.

Within the three reinforced stone walls of the historic building will be a fine dining restaurant. On the other side of the south wall is an indoor event center with a fireplace and retractable walls to split it into two rooms. Outside the north wall is a covered outdoor event space. The three areas are a total of 4,500 square feet.

Behind Lucy's Garden, the second floor and third floor both have expansive decks. The front of the second floor has 1,600 square feet of office space that will be leased to an as-yet-undetermined business. Behind that, facing the two alleys are four one-bedroom workforce apartments, that will be made available to employees in the building first and then other local workers who qualify financially.

The third floor has two condominiums, one for the O'Leary family and one for Steve Chevalier who traded the vacant lot on the north corner for it. The total area for those two residences plus the four apartments is 5,500 square feet.

"We were trying to be sympathetic to the downtown, and surround the Firehouse in a way that doesn't completely swallow it. The development plays to that central piece, by having the historic building as the cornerstone and aligning with historical downtown traits that we see in Ridgway and other mountain areas," Bray said.

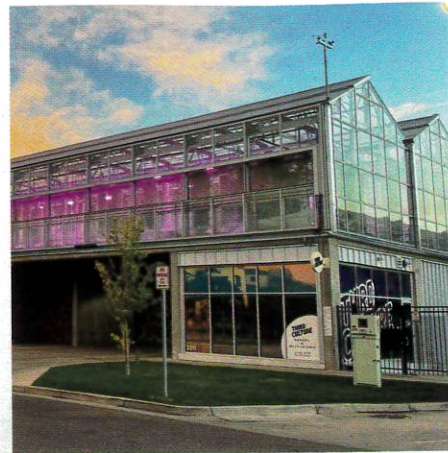
When asked what was most special about working on the project, he doesn't miss a beat



An artist's rendering of what The Hearth restaurant will look like inside the historic Firehouse walls. (Courtesy image)



Greenhouses above Denver sushi restaurant Uchi, where JFS Altius Farms grows non-GMO, pesticide-free produce for 50 restaurants and grocery stores. (Photo courtesy of JFS Altius Farms, LLC)



do very well in aeroponic systems. Around the perimeter, additional soil-based and hydroponic planters will be used for growing tomatoes, peppers, and other plants that are not as well suited to vertical growth.

Some of the plant varieties will include: purple of Sicily cauliflower, sunflower sprouts, field pea shoots, pink celery, strawberry spinach, broccoli raab (rapini), Japanese giant red mustard, scarlet kale, Indian dill, confetti cilantro, Mexican oregano, dark opal basil, Japanese red shiso, and five chile varieties.

Gourmet mushrooms will be grown in special fruiting chambers. The varieties will

include pioppini, black pearl, enoki, Chestnut, king trumpet, combstooth, blue oyster, lion's mane, and maitake.

"We will do a lot of custom tailoring of what we grow for what the kitchen wants to serve," he said. "We want to potentially offer community educational programs on vertical gardening and restaurant and event guest experiences like picking fresh vegetables and flowers for an event or wedding. My hopes are that it's a very productive space."

#### HOME IS WHERE THE HEARTH IS

"Sam is, in my opinion, a master farmer and the food is going to be amazing. He is just a really cool guy. He's an important part of our big team collaborative," said Joe Ouellette, who was brought on by Pat to help develop the restaurant concepts.

Ouellette, who is co-owner of Gnar gourmet tacos and margaritas in Ridgway, has cooked locally for 22 years, including in Ouray, Telluride, and Norwood. The Hearth will have a menu created by Chef Daniel Castillo with Colorado nuances added by Ouellette.

In addition to basing menu items on produce grown on site, "we are being very bespoke about which Colorado farms we choose, to be able to curate our menu with things around us that we find beautiful such

as Palisade peaches, grits milled by Utes in Cortez, Navajo lamb from outside Durango, and San Luis Valley beans," he explained.

Due to the short growing season in southwest Colorado, the restaurant will develop "a really neat preservation program to scatter our local produce throughout the course of the year," he said.

The staff will utilize dehydration, canning, freeze drying, and other methods to make popular produce like Olathe sweetcorn available during seasons outside of July and August.


The restaurant that seats about 70 within the walls of the Firehouse will serve "approachable, upscale New American cuisine. Chef Castillo is phenomenal. He's got this really forward thinking methodology with food that makes dishes really fun. His family has a wine company, too, and being Hispanic, he adds subtle Hispanic flairs to dishes," said Ouellette.

"I have a love for Scandinavian cuisine, which ties in really well with our growing season. What comes from that side is the preservation like pickling and smoking. It will be a melting pot of food," he added.

Pat's Place, with a more relaxed environment, will serve chef-driven pub food and drinks. Each of the outdoor spaces and the event center areas will seat 100-plus guests.

The menus for events will range from fine dining for weddings to canapes for corporate events, and even accommodate corndogs and root beer for youthful affairs like a little league championship celebration. In addition to a wood-burning stove and small kitchen space in the main restaurant, the back kitchen is a huge space, meant to facilitate food preparation for the restaurant, pub, and events all at the same time.

"Another very important point where Patrick and I were aligned was that this project would be rooted in community and creating jobs. It provides a fantastic opportunity for people to work in the community they live in and develop their skills," he said, adding that the employee housing is an impressive feature that truly allows people to live where they work.

"In the conversations that Pat and I had, he was very much building this for the community in every aspect. It was always meant to be at the corner of art and commerce. He always wanted to make a creative, impactful statement with this project. I think the reality is that we are building a really cool space for the future of Ridgway and for everybody to enjoy," he concluded. 

The indoor event center to the south of the Firehouse will have overflow seating for the restaurant and a room that can be divided in two for large or small events, as seen in this rendering. (Courtesy image)



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