

## **A Purpose-Driven Life**

*Designing special buildings for special people is Catherine Purple Cherry's calling.*

Catherine Purple Cherry will tell you that, at the age of 12, she knew she wanted to be an architect. By the time she was a teenager, she knew she would adopt a child. And by her late thirties, having accomplished both goals she discovered a new one: to design buildings and spaces for individuals with special needs.

At that time, Cherry already owned Purple Cherry Architects, a thriving architectural firm in Annapolis, Maryland, specializing in high-end residential waterfront homes. When she saw a request for proposal for a \$4.5 million outpatient facility for adults with mental health disorders, even though it was far removed from her usual line of work, she knew it was something she had to pursue. So it was that, with virtually no commercial experience in her portfolio, armed with not so much as a PowerPoint slide show, Catherine Purple Cherry marched into an interview alone and through the sheer depth of her conviction and life experiences, convinced the client to give her the job.

The resulting project is Arundel Lodge, a 28,000 square foot, two-story facility completed in 2005 that today provides rehabilitation services to more than 140 men and women with psychiatric disabilities. In late 2007, Anne Arundel County Executive John Leopold Arundel Lodge issued an Executive Citation to Arundel Lodge, presenting the project with the Anne Arundel County Commission on Disability Accessibility Award for its "safety and access for people who are disabled with sight impairments, mobility restrictions, etc."

So what is it that drives Cherry to pursue this type of work, a dramatic departure from her previous design experience of commercial and residential structures? "It's where my heart is," Cherry says simply, by way of explanation.

Her vision for the future of her firm is equally clear. "While we will certainly continue working regionally designing high-end residential and owner-occupied commercial buildings, my goal is to take my purpose-driven work nationally, and to be able to personally guide and counsel special needs organizations through projects from assessments and master planning through the final design. I feel it is indeed, my calling," Cherry concludes.

### *Uniquely Qualified*

When you hear her life story, it's easy to see why. Cherry grew up with an older brother with Down Syndrome, to whom she credits her patience, compassion and tolerance. After adopting a three-year old boy from a Russian orphanage with autism and multiple other disabilities and giving birth to two additional children who have been diagnosed with a range of challenges, her calling to be an advocate for individuals with special needs became impossible to ignore.

Cherry says the same tenacity that propels her to vocally and forcefully advocate for her oldest child benefits her clients. She's even penned a name for her firm's mission to plan and design facilities for individuals with special needs: Purpose-Driven Architecture.

Cherry is convinced she is uniquely qualified to execute this type of design. As Cherry says, "Even hundreds of hours of observation can't yield the knowledge I have from growing up with a sibling with special needs and being the parent of a child with special needs."

Through her lifelong interactions and observations of her brother and son—not to mention their support teams of doctors, teachers, and in-home technicians—Cherry believes she has an acute awareness of relevant triggers and environmental issues. As a mom, she says she is acutely aware of how the slightest nuance of light, space, color, or texture can impact her child, and that translates directly into her design work. She also considers how the built environment affects caretakers, not just the disabled.

But Cherry prefers to get involved with a project far in advance of the actual design phase. For one client, Cherry recently assisted in creating a presentation to kick off a capital campaign. She credits her personal compassion as key to allowing her to powerfully convey a group's mission and goals from marketing all the way through meeting the needs of that group and the individuals and families it serves in the final project design. "I sit on a board that is mission-driven and am personally involved with these kinds of groups. I also understand the reality of capital campaigns, endowments and budgets. And I know that their marketing requires more than just elevations and plans. They need to show images and make meaningful connections with their constituents," Cherry says.

#### *Purpose-Driven Future*

Since Purple Cherry won its first purpose-driven project with Arundel Lodge, the firm has gone on to transform 20,000 square feet of commercial office space in Millersville, MD into the Providence Center, which provides transportation, basic care, counseling, employment and other services to 500 adults with developmental disabilities.

The firm's latest purpose-driven project is the new headquarters for Opportunity Builders, Inc., a group that offers transportation and vocational training to adults with disabilities. The \$7.5 million project includes planning and design of a brand new 42,000 square foot facility on a 14.5 acre parcel, also in Millersville. Construction is slated to be completed in 2009.

When asked if other architects practice this same kind of work, Cherry considers for a moment, then responds, "Many architects concentrate on a specific purpose. Some do churches, others make green projects a priority or focus on 'high design.' One of my primary purposes is my commitment to Purpose-Driven Architecture." In fact, Cherry considers all her work to be purpose-driven and strongly believes it is her purpose to serve all of her clients—whether residential, commercial or institutional—by listening to their needs and creating functional, nurturing spaces for people to live, work and play.

Already, word about Purple Cherry seems to be spreading across the country. After a recent exhibit at the 2008 Leadership Conference for the National Association of Private Special Education Centers (NAPSEC), for which Cherry quickly pulled together a brochure on purpose-driven architecture, she received a call from Dr. William Craig, CEO of the Lakemary Center, a special needs school in Kansas. Towards the end of their phone conversation, he told Cherry point-blank, “Never in 30 years have I spoken with an architect who understood the mission of this work.”

And after actually working firsthand with Cherry to produce a marketing piece he calls visionary, Craig says, “Catherine’s understanding of the needs and specialized supports required for youth with developmental disabilities was invaluable in helping our Board of Directors share our vision of what is needed for the children.”

For Cherry, this story signifies the first step towards her latest goal of taking her brand of Purpose-Driven Architecture nationwide. And based on her lifetime track record, it seems certain that it is a question of when, rather than if, she will achieve that goal.

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About Purple Cherry Architects:

Founded in 1997, Purple Cherry Architects is a 16-person full-service architecture firm located in Annapolis, Maryland that provides design for special needs facilities, commercial projects, restaurants and custom residential homes.