

First-of-a-kind hotel opens in downtown Muncie

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MUNCIE — An idea that was once a dream and a sketch on a small square napkin became a reality Tuesday, Dec. 22, with the opening of Courtyard Muncie at Horizon Convention Center and the Erskine Green Institute.

The state-of-the-art hotel at 601 S. High Street, along with the adjoining Thr3e Wise Men restaurant, will employ about 110 people, as well as students from the Erskine Greene facility, which will give those with disabilities the opportunity to pursue careers in the hospitality industry.

"This is a special day for our city," Mayor Dennis Tyler said ahead of the ribbon-cutting ceremony, which took place in front of the hotel. "This (represents) a new generation for Muncie, for its people."

The Arc of Indiana, an advocacy group for those with mental disabilities, has worked closely with the city to make the dream of a first-of-its-kind training hotel a reality, he said.

"The hotel has already spurred growth; we've been in touch with ... businesses who are looking at Muncie now," Tyler said. "It's a very emotional day, to see all this coming together and knowing where it started."

According to Kim Dodson, executive director for the Arc of Indiana, the hotel will open its training center to seven students on Jan. 11.

"We have a couple weeks until they arrive; they'll be here for about nine weeks," Dodson said.

Students graduate from the program after a nine-week training run, she said.

Dodson said having a city like Muncie, which she said has backed the plans for the facility from the start, has played a large role in making it a reality.

"Everybody has embraced not just the building of a new hotel, but the mission and goals of everything surrounding the project," she said.

The 150-room hotel, which is connected to Horizon Convention Center, already had reservations throughout the week, general manager Laura Koenker said. The hotel is managed by General Hotels Corporation, an Indianapolis-based company.

"We already have a handful of people staying on most every night this week," Koenker said.

A wedding party has also made reservations to stay at the hotel in the coming weeks.

"It's great that we can finally welcome guests and start doing (great) things," she said.

[The Huffman family](#), which runs Huffman Consulting in Noblesville, played a role in the project, including the very first inklings of what it could become. The family advocates for those with disabilities.

"We've been talking about it for five years; we've been fundraising, we've been cheerleading ... it hasn't sunk in yet, I don't think," Jeff Huffman said.

The Huffmans' teenage son, Nash was born with Down Syndrome, but he said he's hopeful to be able to be part of the future of the hotel.

"It's really cool to be part of this," Nash Huffman said. "I want to work here."

During the opening ceremony, which was attended by Lt. Gov. Sue Ellspermann and Sen. Joe Donnelly, Jeff Huffman told the crowd he and his wife, Jan Steck Huffman, initially sketched out the idea on a bar napkin.

"I am from Delaware County, after all," he said. "It's incredible that it's turned into this."

The training component of the Courtyard by Marriott hotel is something The Arc of Indiana, as well as city and state-level officials are hopeful gets copied on a national scale by hotels in other cities.

"This is the first of its kind, but I don't think, by a long, long shot think it'll be the last," Donnelly said.

To find out more about the hotel and the Erskine Green Training Center, visit www.facebook.com/CourtyardMuncieAtHorizonConventionCenter or call [765-287-8550](tel:765-287-8550)

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