


Hilarie Burton, Jeffrey Dean Morgan unveil Astor Services contribution

 poughkeepsiejournal.com/story/news/local/2018/03/23/hilarie-burton-jeffrey-dean-morgan-unveil-latest-astor-services-contribution/446152002
Jack Howland

Actress and Rhinebeck resident Hilarie Burton coordinated a fund raiser and a group of volunteers to help renovate Astor Services' residences in Rhinebeck. Patrick Oehler/Poughkeepsie Journal

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(Photo: Patrick Oehler/Poughkeepsie Journal)

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RHINEBECK - As the smell of fresh paint lingered in Astor Services for Children & Families' newest renovated living unit, Hilarie Burton explained how the five-day project came together.



Her husband, Jeffrey Dean Morgan, quietly stood behind her, holding their one-month-old girl. While Morgan, known most recently for his villainous role on “The Walking Dead,” was in Europe this past week, Burton and a team of about 15 volunteers worked to transform the nine-bedroom wing into a colorful oasis.

Walls were painted, misshapen concrete walls were fixed and images of nature — trees, mountains and animals — were added.

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[Jeffrey Dean Morgan, Hilarie Burton helping renovate Astor in Rhinebeck](#)

[SAMUEL'S SWEET SHOP: Paul Rudd and Jeffrey Dean Morgan help keep Rhinebeck sweet](#)

The renovated space on the second floor of the Rhinebeck property is a stark contrast to the building's two untouched downstairs wings, with bare white walls rife with cracks and crevices. Burton said she hopes the children who rely on Astor's residential and mental health services can take a lesson from that comparison

“I want these kids to know what it looks (like) downstairs and to see that it's rough and it's not pretty and it's not comfortable,” she said before a crowd of Astor staff, volunteers and community members Thursday. “But to see that over the course of five days they have the capability... to turn something that's not great into something really fun and whimsical. And I want them to be able to take that and apply it to their own life.”

However, those downstairs wings will be renovated soon, as well.

This week's project was the latest step in the celebrity couple's ongoing efforts to assist the Rhinebeck property and the children it serves. The wing was the second Burton and Morgan have rehabilitated over the last 12 months, and their public support of the non-profit organization has helped fundraising soar.



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Hilarie Burton describes the efforts volunteers put into redecorating a residential unit inside Astor Services in Rhinebeck on March 22, 2018. (Photo: Patrick Oehler/Poughkeepsie Journal)

The renovations were made possible by the \$80,000 raised at Astor's Ghost Stories event in November, which featured Burton, Morgan and a surprise guest — their friend, business partner and fellow actor Paul Rudd. The trio and others are co-owners of Samuel's Sweet Shop in Rhinebeck.

Enough was raised that night to renovate both remaining bedroom wings, though the timeline for those projects is not yet known.

Actor Hilarie Burton reads a spooky tale at Ghost Stories, a benefit event for Astor Services for Children & Families held at Bard College. Alex H. Wagner/Poughkeepsie Journal

Local companies, such as McEathron Contracting, Williams Lumber & Home Centers and Benjamin Moore have also donated time and materials to the renovations.

Burton, who has starred on such shows as “Lethal Weapon” and “One Tree Hill,” and Morgan got involved with Astor about three years ago out of curiosity. That led them to a friend who was involved with the Families for Astor Committee, a fundraising organization. And, upon visiting the Rhinebeck site, the Pleasant Valley couple were struck by the need for upgrades.

“Honestly, I think (Burton and Dean Morgan) have changed my concept of celebrity,” said Nancy Dauley, Astor’s director of quality improvement. “You often see celebrities as those who don’t want to interact with their communities. But they’re amazing.”

Astor has provided behavioral and educational services for children, some of whom have suffered trauma and psychiatric illness, and their families, since 1953. While the organization is based in Rhinebeck, it also operates in other areas of Dutchess County, Ulster County and the Bronx.



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A residential unit inside Astor Services was redecorated with the help of Hilarie Burton and dozens of volunteers in Rhinebeck on March 22, 2018. The common room in this unit utilizes an outdoors theme. (Photo: Patrick Oehler/Poughkeepsie Journal)

Natural progression

Burton said the first step with this week’s project was to look at the space and imagine what could be done with it. The brown tiles, which she said couldn’t be changed, made her think of dirt; the ceilings that tower in the hallways and dip in the communal area reminded her of valleys.

On Friday, the residential unit's ceilings and walls were sprayed blue, letting Burton and her team "hit the ground running" with painting and repair work on Monday, she said. The team also added wooden "chair rails" to the walls, and brought in around 140 items people had purchased off an online registry like nature-themed pillows, bedding and lamps.

Mark McEathron, the owner of the Millbrook-based McEathron Contracting, said the biggest challenge was getting items up to the second-floor unit, since the elevator is in a separate part of the building. That meant volunteers had to walk further through other units, "sometimes with kids within the unit," he said.

"That added a little bit of difficulty but we were a lot more prepared this time around than we were last time," he said. "So we just kind of rolled with the punches."



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A bedroom inside Astor Services which was redecorated with the help of Hilarie Burton and dozens of volunteers in Rhinebeck on March 22, 2018. (Photo: Patrick Oehler/Poughkeepsie Journal)

A sign now hangs in the space declaring it "Camp Vincentian," named for St. Vincent. The previously renovated unit is called Camp Paulist after St. Paul.

Astor CEO Jim McGuirk, who oversees Astor's facilities and programs throughout the Hudson Valley and the Bronx, said giving the kids a fun and pretty space is about showing them they're "cared for."

“These kids have a lot of problems in their life. They’ve been traumatized in ways that are really unimaginable,” he said. “What they don’t recognize is their strengths... they don’t recognize they’re capable, competent kids. So, we give them those messages all the time.”

Astor staff members referred to Burton as their “G.C.”, or general contractor, of the project, involved from the design of the rooms through construction.

Morgan said he’s not surprised she’s garnered that reputation since she’s “in charge” around the house. He joked that he wouldn’t be able to “get his pants on in the morning” without her and said helping Astor is a “perfect gig” for his wife.

“She was born helping people, and that continues even after she just gave birth herself five weeks ago,” he said, calling the project “her baby. ... We came in this together but she really has run away with it.”

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