

West End Word/Page 5

JUNE 28-JULY 4, 2006

Gills turn FPSE neighborhood into grove of development ideas



WEW file photo

Amy and Amrit Gill

By Kara Krekeler

A year after delving into a massive Forest Park Southeast development project, Restoration St. Louis owners Amrit and Amy Gill show no signs of stopping.

The Gills now own almost 70 buildings in the neighborhood — which is increasingly referred to as “The Grove” — and are working on buying more. Their intent is to buy and renovate 100 buildings or lots as part of a \$50 million development, with the goal of jump-starting additional development for the area.

“If we can get the worst 100 buildings and lots in the neighborhood and do infill housing or retail, then we will have changed the neighborhood so much,” said Amy Gill, adding that she has spoken to several other developers interested in the neighborhood. “The Grove’s going to be amazing, and I can’t wait until we have more done.”

Gill said that she and her husband were looking for a project in the city that would allow them to make a difference in a neighborhood. Previously, the husband-and-wife team has developed Coronado Place and The Moolah but was looking for a return to a larger project.

“We love doing neighborhoods,” Gill said. “We did Skinker-DeBaliviere, and we loved it.”

Currently the Gills have seven construction crews working in the Grove, with each crew finishing a building every three or four months, Gill said. Recently completed buildings include 4318 Manchester Ave. and two single-family buildings on Oakland Avenue.

Crews are slated to finish work on an office and apartment building at 4400 Chouteau in July, as well as “The Castle,” a building at 4196 Manchester Ave. Gill said she is hoping to find a fun ethnic restaurant to move into The Castle but hasn’t come across any takers yet.

The neighborhood was originally built in the 1850s as one of the city’s first subdivisions and was filled with small family businesses. But since the city’s general decline began some 50 years ago, the area once known as Adam’s Grove had fallen into disrepair with many of the small

businesses abandoning their storefronts as residents moved out of the city.

But those family-owned businesses are beginning to make a return. A new restaurant, Five, has opened at 4317

Manchester Ave. Chef Anthony Devoti owns the restaurant — the name of which is a nod to the five senses — but his parents, Joe and Bonnie, are involved with the eatery as well.

“It’s a mom-and-pop adventure, too,” Bonnie Devoti said. She and her husband intend to spend as much time as possible in the restaurant, the family’s first.

Devoti said the short menu — which features a “New American” style that blends Russian, Italian, French, Asian and traditional

See Gills, page 10

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Gills from page 5

American cuisines — changes daily, depending on what Anthony can find fresh at the market. Devoti said 80 percent of the food at Five is fresh from local farmers and purveyors.

Although Five just opened June 12, Devoti said it's already apparent to her family that the neighborhood appreciates the presence of the restaurant. "They're thanking us

for moving in," she said. As the restaurant was opening, people stopped by and asked to just come in and see what was going on inside, she said.

"It's an exciting, fun place to be," Devoti said of the neighborhood. "We wanted to move back to the city [with the business]. We felt the whole area was coming back."

Devoti said that in the time since they started looking for a location — the Gills first showed them the space at the beginning of the year — the neighborhood has already changed immensely. "I really think the development will catch on — it already has," she said.

Later this summer, the Gills will welcome another tenant to the neighborhood, a market and catering headquarters for restaurateur Joe

Boccardi. Boccardi already has an Italian eatery in the Gills' Coronado Place but chose to forgo opening another restaurant in the Grove.

"We have too many restaurants and didn't need another one," Boccardi said. "We needed to move the catering, and the space was bigger than what we need for catering, so we added the market."

Boccardi said the new location is primarily a base for the catering business, although it will also house a market and deli where patrons can pick up sandwiches and products such as cheese, sauces and meatballs.

The location, he said, is ideal for the catering base, citing the close proximity to highways 40 and 44, as well as the Barnes-Jewish Hospital medical complex. "We do a lot of catering for pharmaceutical events," he said.

Boccardi said there is no date set for the market's opening, although he estimated that it would be in late July. He said his primary goal at this point is setting up the catering business in the new location. **W**

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