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## Assisted living facility celebrates 25 years, plans \$8 million expansion

VICTORVILLE — Like a mighty fortress that has stood the test of time, the Sterling Inn independent and assisted living facility celebrated its 25th anniversary with a special mix-and-meet gathering last Thursday evening.

The three-hour celebration at the facility on Francesca and Ridgecrest roads in Victorville was attended by residents of the multi-floor complex as well as community, regional and civic leaders, including Victorville Mayor Gloria Garcia and Hesperia Councilman Russ Blewett.



Aaron and Judy Koelsch stand next to a photo taken in the 1990s after Aaron had begun construction of the Sterling Inn. The facility celebrated its 25th anniversary on Thursday in Victorville. Jose Huerta, Daily Press

Don Barber, the executive director of the Sterling Inn and Sterling Commons memory care services, greeted many of the guests as they entered, and enjoyed food, entertainment and conversation at the facility's silver anniversary bash.

“Not only do we get to celebrate our anniversary, we also have the privilege of honoring our veterans who live here,” said Barber, who’s been with the facility for 22 years. “We also have a lot of the home office staff from Olympia, Washington here today and many of the Koelsch community.”

Calling it the flagship facility of the 23 Koelsch Senior Communities, President and CEO Aaron Koelsch told the audience that he was proud of every employee who worked hard to make the family-owned Sterling Inn the success that it’s been for a quarter of a century.

“One of our core values is the attention to detail, that’s the reason why the Sterling Inn doesn’t look 25 years old,” Koelsch told the Daily Press. “So many people have poured themselves into this community, and without their love and commitment we would not be here.”

As visitors enjoyed glass Coca Cola in glass bottles and examined teacher Todd Anton's restored 1944 military jeep, Koelsch told a reporter how the Victorville facility began with 132 rooms, with a few consolidated into larger suites over the years.

Koelsch said once financing is complete, the Sterling Inn plans to build 36 more apartment units on a little over an acre on the north end of the community. The \$8 million project, which will include a large courtyard, is scheduled to begin construction by the end of the year or the early part of 2016.

"This expansion project was actually planned years ago, but it was stalled when the economy turned," Koelsch said. "Things were looking good financially so we took the opportunity to invest in the community."

Koelsch said the Sterling Inn has been received positively over the years by residents of the facility and the High Desert community, with his main gauge being the occupancy rate and the demand for living units.

"Over the last 10 years, the Sterling Inn has averaged nearly 94 percent occupancy," Koelsch said. "It doesn't mean that every single customer is happy, but the vast majority are happy. And a great source of referrals have come through word of mouth."

Robert "Red" Hamilton, who was born in Pana, Illinois in 1926, was one of many seniors who was at the event. Hamilton, who's been at the inn for about eight years, said he enjoys the "top-notch" facility and said he "never goes hungry."

Blewett said many of the inn's staff and residents, which he considers family, told him that they still remembered his parent's room number — 217.

"My parents, John and Kathryn Blewett, were here for a number of years until they passed," Blewett said. "My father was one of the hardest people to please but he and my mother absolutely loved it here. The Sterling Inn treats their residents royally."

Anton, who is also an author, told those gathered that it's been an honor for his students at Heritage School in Phelan to come and visit with the veterans at the inn over the years.

Koelsch told the audience that Michele Spears, CEO and president of the Victor Valley Chamber of Commerce, began her work with the chamber during the same time Sterling Inn became a part of the Victor Valley.

Just before a ribbon cutting ceremony to celebrate the past and future of the inn, Spears told the Daily Press that much of the success of the Sterling Inn can be attributed to the deep roots that Koelsch, his wife Judy, and the entire company have planted in the High Desert.

"We've seen a lot of changes in the Victor Valley, but the Sterling Inn continues to stand strong," Spears said. "We're excited to celebrate this day with them and are also excited about their future."

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