

A prescription for preservation
By Tara Fasol, The Southern
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Dr. Ted Van Acker stands next to the enlarged photo of a former fire chief in the Old City Hall in West Frankfort. (DAVE TAYLOR / THE SOUTHERN)

WEST FRANKFORT - Dr. Ted Van Acker has a degree in dermatology but it is his knack for renovation that has helped turn many Southern Illinois eyesores into beautifully restored buildings.

Among those dilapidated buildings facing demolition, before Van Acker's rescue, was the Old City Hall building in West Frankfort.

Constructed in 1925, it served many years as the city hall, fire department, police department, jail and courthouse.

Today, Van Acker's Southern Illinois Dermatology office shares the building with Shawnee Alliance for Seniors and his project in the making, The Old Firehouse Event Center.

"Frank Savka called me when they were getting ready to tear this building down," Van Acker said. "He asked if I would come and look at it."

Van Acker said he agreed to give the building the once-over and he almost immediately saw a vision of restoration and community activity.

At a West Frankfort City Council meeting shortly afterward, the city offered Van Acker the contract to buy the building, although he was the lowest of three bidders.

Six months to a year later, he started the work that has totaled about \$750,000 in renovation costs to date.

"We converted the jail into our medical offices," Van Acker said. "We actually see our patients in the old jail cells."

The original barred cell doors are still on the hinges, but Van Acker said he added wooden doors as well, for privacy.

On one door, lettering reads "Examination Cell 101." Inside, Van Acker pointed out cell bars on the windows and other extras that were added to complement the décor and give his patients something fun to look at.

"The patients just love it," he said. "I have had a few people say, 'I was in this jail about 40 years ago.'"

Van Acker said the West Frankfort location is one of his favorites out of about 20 buildings he has bought for renovation since coming to Southern Illinois in 1996.

As he walked through hallways that used to be dark and dilapidated, he pointed out historic photos he had enlarged and hung on walls covered in bright-colored paint.

In what was formerly the fire bay, Van Acker resurrected the pole that firemen used to slide down. A piano that George Harrison played on during his first visit to the U.S. sits just several feet away.

"We've pretty much redone every single inch," Van Acker said. "The building is very useful now and it's kind of my gift back to the community. This building is pretty significant because of the history of it. People were married here and different people remember firefighters or police who worked here. There are those memories."

Van Acker said he couldn't keep all of his projects in order without the help of his property manager, Denise Ryan, whose office is now located out of West Frankfort.

"Everybody is really supportive," she said about the communities that Van Acker reaches out to. "They don't want another empty lot. They thank us for helping with the buildings."

Ryan said she particularly enjoys the work that has been done on the West Frankfort facility, although she named a number of other locations she manages including 13 Southern Illinois Dermatology locations, a number of fitness facilities, approximately 20 buildings purchased for renovation, rental property, and branches of Egyptian Revival Day Spa and Wellness Center, which Van Acker owns with his partner, Barry Vesciglio.

"It was important to me, to bring skin care to all of the people of Southern Illinois," Van Acker said. "We are actually bringing our skin care to them."

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DETAILS

Dr. Ted Van Acker has Southern Illinois Dermatology offices located in Du Quoin, Harrisburg, Herrin, Murphysboro, Salem and West Frankfort. Satellite offices are located in Carbondale, Chester, Flora, McLeansboro, Sparta and Vandalia.

Van Acker has renovated buildings in a number of communities, including turning an old building on Main Street in Herrin into a Southern Illinois Dermatology facility, renovating a downtown Harrisburg building to put in a gym, and also picking up several buildings for renovation in Murphysboro, including the old Elks Lodge, which is now the Murphysboro Event Center.