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## **Backtracking: In Our Times: South Kortright estate had history of helping many**

by Mark Simonson

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Just last November, the Phoenix House in South Kortright, a substance-abuse treatment center, closed its doors for the final time.

It was 25 years ago that the Phoenix House got its start, but not without its share of controversy.

The Daily Star reported on March 13, 1991, that the state granted a license for the treatment center for up to 168 people with substance abuse problems at the former Belle Terre estate. However a citizens' group was fighting the decision in court and had already obtained a court order to temporarily halt the project. The group's concerns included an increase in crime and traffic, and putting a strain on water and sewage systems.

South Kortright residents opposing the plan had met Monday night, asking Roxbury attorney Herbert Jordan to take their case to court. They asked for an Environmental Impact Statement on the facility and to invalidate the license granted to Phoenix House. The stay order was issued the next day by the state Supreme Court. No action could be taken until a court hearing.

The Phoenix House, then recognized as the nation's largest private drug rehabilitation agency, was looking to open the South Kortright facility in a few weeks. While there was opposition to the plan, the area had its proponents, saying the facility would give the area an economic boost by creating new jobs.

The Star reported on May 21, "An Albany judge has ruled that the state does not have to complete an environmental study ... clearing the way for the Phoenix House Foundation to start treating substance abusers." A spokesman for the Phoenix House said 25 clients were moved into the center on Friday, May 17, the day after the judge handed down his decision.

"After July 1, we should have the capability to house 168 people," said spokesman Christopher Policano.

In a follow-up near the first anniversary of the opening, The Star reported on June 1, 1992, "The controversy ... is gone now. Fears that the program would be too much for quiet South Kortright have died down, and those who fought the Phoenix House's plans last year are now silent."

The news story described how all residents of Phoenix House had jobs in operating the facility, telling about daily life on the grounds, and stories from residents about getting into recovery and second chances at life. Residents were in the program for 18 to 24 months and had opportunities to take courses for a GED or other vocational training.

Closure came in November 2015, and was attributed to a variety of factors, including changing health care policies, fiscal challenges, a remote location and fewer clients. There were 66 male clients at the facility when closure was announced in September. New national leadership in the Phoenix House Foundation, which runs 70 similar facilities in 10 states, was aiming toward smaller, community-based outpatient programs.

The Belle Terre estate had a long history in South Kortright. James McLean was known in New York City in the early 1900s as the "Copper King," amassing a fortune in a copper brokerage business. The peace and quiet of the Catskills and Delaware County attracted him to the region. The family would come upstate each spring to its mansion in South Kortright, a second home.

Alice T. McLean took an interest in the old estate after her father passed away, and the family no longer spent time at the mansion. She organized the American Women's Voluntary Service, a women's organization to aid in the efforts of World War II. One effort was getting wayward girls to work on an experimental farm on the grounds to grow food for the war.

Another creation by Alice McLean was "International Valley" on the grounds. This was an effort to further the arts in international good will. In 1946 she hosted a large gathering of women from the United Nations, as well as Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt.

Mrs. McLean continued her philanthropic efforts until 1953 when she sold part of the property. The grounds had various uses from that time until 1991.