

Solid foundation for charities

By: Paddy Manning - Charity

There are probably a few people around who think the Property Industry Foundation's main purpose is to put on a free booze-up every year – the spectacular Sydney Harbour yachting regatta, Australia's largest. They should think again.

From Woolloomooloo to Emu Plains in Sydney's outer west and in troubled Macquarie Fields, the foundation is quietly using its goodwill and industry network to get quality building work done cheaply for charity groups.

At Emu Plains, the foundation was able to do a \$247,000 renovation of the Marist Youth Centre, for \$122,935 by using pro bono tradesmen and consultants, and heavily discounted or at-cost materials. The savings on components like electrical, flooring, landscaping and windows amounted to \$125,000.

The dilapidated centre was donated to the Marist Brothers by the NSW Department of Housing.

Marist Youth Centre board member Ken Buttrum, former director-general of the Department of Juvenile Justice, took the running with the project. The Property Industry Foundation's Beneficiaries Review Committee approved a \$165,000 donation, but the tenders came in \$70,000 to \$80,000 over budget.

The Brothers would either have to fund the gap themselves, or wind back the renovation.

According to Adam Arden, a qualified quantity surveyor who consults to PIF as chief projects manager, Glebe-based contractors FDC Building Services came to the rescue, after being contracted by Barry Munns, a director of project management firm Incoll, a PIF donor.

FDC took on the Emu Plains renovation on a cost-plus, no-profit-margin basis. Their condition was that any savings made would either go into the project or go back to the foundation to be distributed to the other beneficiaries.

Mr Arden said it was the first time the foundation had secured a pro bono contractor and FDC's contribution was the key to the success of the Emu Plains project. FDC principal and managing director Ben Cottle championed the project, and helped PIF rope in its network of sub-contractors and suppliers. There were three working bees. Plenty of materials, like carpet, were donated.

"The response was amazing," Mr Arden said. "People were very happy to be working on that project."

The renovation had particular challenges. Most of the clients were troubled youth – some had had 30-40 placements before coming to the Marist Youth Centre. All the walls had to be impact-resistant, lined with fibre-cement sheeting, so if kids started punching walls, Mr Arden said, "the first time they do it they break a knuckle".

The centre had to be low-maintenance. People jumping off stairways was a risk. There was a lot of thought given to how the kids would interact with each other in group areas.

The centre, which has accommodation for a full-time carer, an office for staff and bedrooms for up to four teenagers at any one time, will be finished by the end of next week. Clients will move in from next month, once it is furnished. Interior designer Melissa Collison has contributed curtains, and recreational facilities like table tennis tables. "It's looking fantastic – like a house that most of us would be very happy to live in," Mr Arden said yesterday.

PIF chief executive Rosemary Smithson said Mr Arden, who donated his own time for nine months last year but was now on a moderate retainer, was brought on board to help charities which were out of their depth with building projects.

"They had no idea, some of these projects were just dragging on".

Some of the next big projects for PIF include contributing to a \$800,000 refurbishment of the PCYC drop-in centre in Woolloomoolloo, and refurbishing the Salvation Army's drop-in and counseling centre at impoverished Macquarie Fields in Sydney's far southwest, which was the scene of bitter rioting with police last year. The centre is in disrepair, having suffered from vandalism and neglect. The project is being spearheaded by the Salvos centre manager and captain Michelle White, as part of National Hard Hat Day on May 16.

Mr Arden said the job was daunting: "It's right in the middle of where the riots started. It's almost like an island site, surrounded by streets strewn with bottles and broken glass, providing amazing services to the underprivileged local children."