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Oakhill Day School completes renovations for first day of school

By GLENN E. RICE
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The clamor of excited schoolchildren echoed throughout the halls during the first day of classes Tuesday at a renovated Oakhill Day School in Gladstone.

“Welcome Back,” banners hung in the doorways, and the smell of fresh paint and new carpet permeated the air.

Tuesday’s sights and sounds were a dramatic contrast to how the school looked three months ago.

An EF2 tornado that swept through the Northland early May 2 ravaged the independent private school at 70th and North Cherry streets, leaving it uninhabitable.

“To be able to open today (Tuesday) is very rewarding,” said Suzanne McCanles, head of the school. “Our 10-year, long-range plans were condensed into one summer.”

McCanles said teams of construction workers, teachers, staff members and volunteers worked throughout the summer refurbishing and renovating the school. The goal, McCanles said, was to start the new school year inside the decades-old school, exactly 108 days after two tornadoes struck the Northland.

The tornadoes ripped mile-long swaths into neighborhoods and homes in Gladstone, Liberty and Kansas City, North. Oakhill Day School was among those structures hit the hardest.

Strong winds peeled off sections of the roof, exposing the classrooms and offices to heavy rain and wind damage.

Ten classrooms, several offices and hallways sustained significant damage, the preschool playground equipment was demolished, natural gas lines were exposed, and the heating and air-conditioning unit was blown apart.

The tornado struck with three weeks left in the school year. Within days, Oakhill Day School was able to relocate at Antioch Bible Baptist Church, where the school used the facility for its summer school program.

“While it (the tornado) was devastating, it became an opportunity to be better than we were before,” she said.

For parent Neil Neumeyer of Kansas City, North, it was important that students were able to return

to their old school.

“They (school officials) have taken a tragedy and turned it into an opportunity,” said Neumeyer, whose son Jackson is enrolled in the pre-kindergarten class.

McCanles said the renovation work included many enhancements and upgrades.

For example, the art room was transformed into a science lab for middle school students. The computer lab no longer exists, replaced with wireless capabilities. The dining room area features exposed spiral ductwork with a large window allowing natural light to fill the room.

On Monday, the school had an ice cream social to allow students and parents to visit their classroom and see all of the changes.

McCanles said, “In the back of my mind, I had a Plan B, but I never shared it.”

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