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Legacy blooms in Coventry

A war hero's dying wish has been fulfilled today as a garden in his memory opened at the city hostel where he spent 20 years of his life.

Peter Szczepka left £14,000 to Whitefriars Housing Group on the condition it be used to benefit the residents of the Chace Hostel, in Chace Avenue, Willenhall.

The 84-year-old, who fought in the Polish Free Army in the Second World War, came to Coventry in the 1980s and remained there until his death in January 2003.

Work began last year to create a memorial to Mr Szczepka, and the garden, complete with commemorative plaque, was officially opened today by his former friends, and ITV Central News presenter Joanne Malin.

In a fitting tribute to Mr Szczepka, a former derelict area has been transformed into an oasis of peace, with patios, benches, lighting, hanging baskets, sculpted hedges and re-turfed lawn.

His former friend William Wichary, 83, said: "I've lived here for 26 years now and knew Peter well. He was a very quiet gentleman who thought of the Chace as his home. He didn't drink, or smoke very much, and he didn't spend much on himself.

"The garden looks really nice and peaceful."

A number of hostel residents have volunteered to maintain the garden to ensure it blooms in the future.

Resident Trevor Allen, 47, said: “The garden looked like a bombsite before with broken sheds and glass. You couldn’t even use the door into the garden, it just wasn’t safe.

“It looks really nice now and it is great. I didn’t know Peter, but it is nice to think someone did something which benefits everybody. It’s not nice to be locked up inside your room, so the garden will allow us to get outside and have some space.

“Things like this keep you going.”

To celebrate the garden unveiling, residents also enjoyed a men’s health day thanks to the hostel staff and health experts from Coventry and Warwickshire Primary Care Trust.

Dentists, chiropodists and nutritionists popped down to the hostel to give residents a treat and educate them on how to look after themselves.

Whitefriars’ housing services manager Neil Evans said: “The garden is a real peaceful oasis now, and we’re really pleased that the year of hard work has now paid off.

“The hostel has recently undergone a major renovation of the television lounges and study to improve the building for residents, and the opening of the garden is a real cherry on the cake.

“Mr Szczepka’s generous donation will have a real impact on the lives of our residents, and we are indebted to his generous action.”

A hostel has existed on the site since 1939 when it was used to house up to 1,250 factory workers during the war. Today it is home for up to 200 residents.

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