



NONPROFITS & PHILANTHROPY

ChildSafe's new Eastside home focuses on 'healing and restoring'



by **Steve Bennett**
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ChildSafe is located on the Eastside of San Antonio on a historic family farm plot. Credit: Scott Ball / San Antonio Report

Built on a solid foundation of massive sandstone blocks flashing earthy shades of copper, brown, and gray in the sunlight, the Eastside headquarters of ChildSafe nevertheless feels like something about to take flight. A hang glider maybe. Or a paper airplane.

Its dark metal roof is full of startling angles and seams in various pitches that culminate in soaring winglike structures, adding a sense of wonder, almost playfulness, to a facility that has the most serious of missions: the care of abused children.

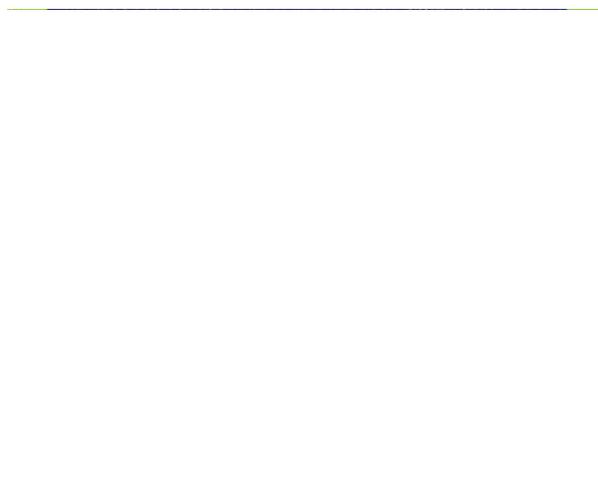
“The roof evolved to be a symbol of the mission,” said Michael Rey, senior principal and vice president of operations at Overland Partners, the designer of ChildSafe’s Harvey E. Najim Children and Family Center and known for other care-related projects like Haven for Hope and the Children’s Hospital of San Antonio. “It’s sheltering like a mother bird in a nest. It has these childlike angel’s wings that were part of the inspiration. It’s about holding all these entities together.”



square-foot building.

Previously located in two institutional buildings on U.S. Highway 90 and Loop 410 totaling 13,000 square feet, ChildSafe has a new home in a centrally located – on Interstate 10 at East Houston – center for therapy, investigation, and education.

Opened late last year, it's meant to reduce the stress and trauma on children being shuffled around the county, having to retell their stories of abuse. Most of the children, ages 3 to 17, cared for at ChildSafe have been sexually assaulted.



“Our staff does the initial forensic interview in special interview rooms, which are closely monitored by law enforcement on video screens just across the hall,” said Kim Abernethy, president and CEO of ChildSafe.

One of the main design challenges was that while some areas needed to be strictly separated, others needed to be closely connected. Multiple entrances and walkways were crucial for preliminary meetings involving all the parties so that victims didn't turn a corner and come face to face with their abusers. A basic U-shaped structured offered the best solution, given the parameters of the site.



ChildSafe CEO Kim Abernethy. Credit: Scott Ball / San Antonio Report

The process began five years ago after a 33-acre site along Salado Creek, adjacent to the Wheatley Heights Sports Complex, was identified. The design process was slow and thorough, as Overland's architects and engineers gained input from the various entities involved as well as the surrounding community.

"We're not a stylistic firm," Rey said. "What you see here comes from a vision developed by those involved in the project. We believe that the physical environment can lead to human change."



Overland Partners Senior Principal and Operations Vice President Michael Rey. Credit: Scott Ball / San Antonio Report

That is one of the basic tenets of biophilic design, which has taken on much more gravity since its inception in the '80s in the building of care facilities such as hospitals and treatment centers: connect building occupants more closely to nature through factors such as natural lighting and landscaping, even ventilation.

Sustainability is a key factor, so biophilic buildings like ChildSafe's maximize energy and water savings through solar energy and creative uses of shade and rain runoff storage systems. Smart sensors regulate power supply to different sections of the campus. Even the air-conditioning condensation is recycled.

The 10-acre campus – about 20 acres of the original site was deeded to the city for green space – features large glass walls, terraces, and patios, which look out on roof gardens, a picnic area, a trail system, a healing pond, and an adventure therapy course.



able to smell or hear it the positive implications are even greater.”

Research shows that biophilic design directly results in decreased stress, enhanced creativity, and accelerated recovery from illness. In the workplace, its benefits include the reduction of sick days.

Abernethy said that while children’s needs were foremost, planners also had to think about the people who work at ChildSafe – about 100 of them, from counselors to law enforcement, treating some 5,000 cases a year. So, there’s a large central kitchen area and meeting space banked by a wall of windows as well as amenities like a full gym for employees to blow off steam.

“They have an incredibly traumatic job, dealing with one of the most horrific aspects of our society,” said Abernethy.

From a physical standpoint, the architect’s challenge was to avoid making the project feel like an institutional building housing bureaucrats.

“A lot of facilities like this end up looking like a government building where you get a medical exam, and we didn’t want it to be like that,” Rey said. “At the same time, we didn’t want it to feel like the Hill Country, so we decided early not to use limestone. But we also didn’t want it to feel like a residence, which is where most abuse happens. We wanted to try and reflect Eastside culture in the design. And you’ll notice that there are no fences.”



The Valero Energy Foundation family waiting room at Childsafe. Credit: Scott Ball / San Antonio Report

Inside, a warm neutral palette throughout, from public spaces like the Kid Cave to family waiting rooms, is set off by pops of color in modular functional furniture and artworks borrowed from the University of Texas at San Antonio collection, including an untitled painting of grazing horses by Montana artist Ted Waddell in the foyer. Signage and graphics delineate various sections – therapy, law enforcement – through different colors and symbols, such as a stylized lotus plant, a boat, and a butterfly symbolizing metamorphosis.

“People need to know where they are in a building like this,” Rey said. “It seems irregular, but it’s actually organized very logically.”

ChildSafe’s cost, including land acquisition, design and construction, is \$33 million, with a foundational lead gift of \$5 million from San Antonio businessman and philanthropist Harvey E. Najim.

“He’s fabulous,” Abernethy said, “so thoughtful in his giving.”



raised, she said, making it clear that donations are still welcomed.

“People might ask, ‘Why do you have such a nice building?’ And my answer is, ‘Why wouldn’t we?’” she said.

Rey looks at the project “as an investment for the community and the mission of the organization.”

“Most of us don’t have to scratch the surface very far to find abuse in our lives or our histories,” he said. “It can get personal very quickly. As Kim likes to say, ‘The ultimate goal is to put ChildSafe out of business.’ Then this can become a community center, and that’s the way it was designed. We did our best to make it a place of reconciliation, restoration and hope.”

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STEVE BENNETT

Steve Bennett has written about arts and culture in San Antonio for more than 30 years. [More by Steve Bennett](#)

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