

FROM HISTORIC CHURCH TO MEDICAL OFFICE

Ben Lomond's Steven and Vivian Leib transform the former Wee Kirk



PHOTOS BY KEVIN JOHNSON — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Dr. Steven Leib, his wife Vivian and their dog Mollie stand inside of the historic church on Central Avenue in Ben Lomond Monday. The couple renovated the downtown church and turned it into a family medicine clinic.

By Kara Guzman

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BEN LOMOND » After years of falling into disrepair, a historical downtown church is once again serving the community, as the new family medicine office of Dr. Steven Leib.

Known as "Wee Kirk," the former Presbyterian church was built about 1891 by lumber mill owner James Pierce. Pierce, who planned much of Ben Lomond's early development, offered the church to any denomination that would buy it. He intended the building, now listed by Santa Cruz County as a historic resource and the San Lorenzo Valley's oldest church, to serve the public, said Lisa Rob-

inson, San Lorenzo Valley Historical Society president.

The Central Street building was last used as a church in 1968, and has since changed owners multiple times. Most recently, it was used as storage for an online bath and spa boutique.

Vivian Leib said when she and her husband bought the property in February, the building needed extensive repair, such as new flooring and ceilings. The couple hired carpenters and painters, but managed the project themselves, working 18-hour days while still managing an office in Scotts Valley.

Repairing the church was a labor of love, she said.



The setting sun peers through one of the windows of the historic church located on Central Avenue in Ben Lomond Monday as Dr. Steven Leib exits the building that he and his wife turned into a family medicine clinic.

"It's got the Norman Rockwellian feel, but it's not the old-fashioned medicine."

— Dr. Steven Leib

Church

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"Every decision that went into the place, we thought of it historically," said Vivian Leib, who said even the old-fashioned exam tables were chosen to keep a consistent look.

Family feel

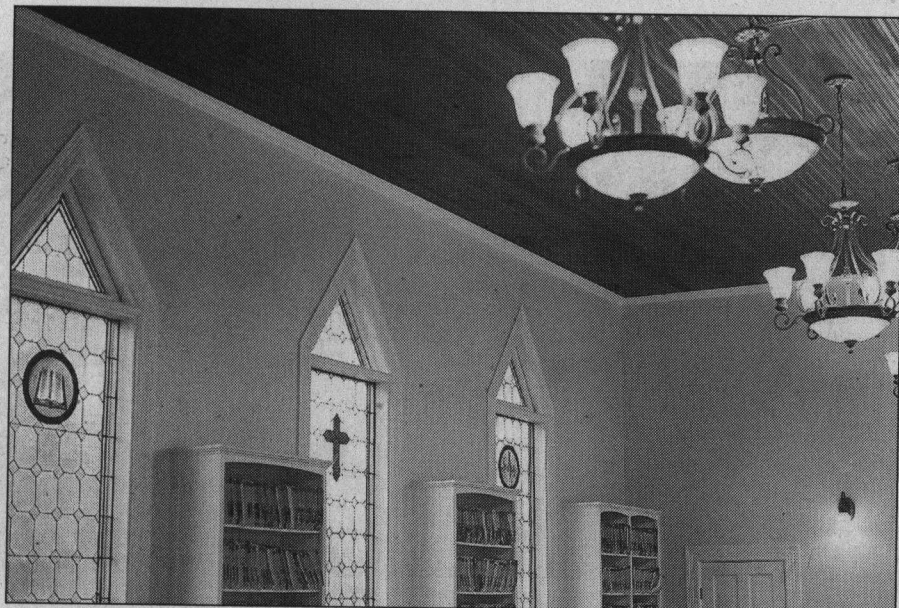
The Ben Lomond couple, who lives in a restored Victorian farmhouse, enjoys a vintage aesthetic, said Steven Leib. They repaired the church's bell tower and stained glass windows, adorned with some of the valley's early settlers.

"It's got the Norman Rockwellian feel, but it's not the old-fashioned medicine," said Steven Leib, who said his practice focuses on preventing chronic diseases such as diabetes using advanced tools.

Wanting to practice family medicine in a small town, Steven Leib began his career taking over for Felton's Dr. Ashby Steele, then an 81-year-old country doctor, he said.

Steele built his practice by focusing on relationships, an approach that has stayed with Leib, who has since worked in the San Lorenzo Valley for more than 25 years, he said. Leib said moving his practice to Ben Lomond allows him to continue working with his wife, who manages the office, and also bring his dog, Mollie, to work. The family feel brings comfort to patients, he said.

Vivian Leib said the patients are her neighbors, and when they call, they don't bother introducing



KEVIN JOHNSON — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Stall stained-glass windows are a part of the original architecture of the historic Ben Lomond church that is now a family medical clinic.

themselves.

"Certainly no one would give me their client number, and often times not even their last name," she said. "And sometimes I even know them by their voice."

Larger trend

The Leibs, with Lisa Robinson's help, are seeking to list the building on the national registry of historic places. San Lorenzo has five places on the list, including the San Lorenzo Valley Museum and the Felton Covered Bridge.

Robinson said the Leib's project is part of a larger trend of historic building remodels in the valley, including Felton's Cremer House, a former hotel recently reopened as a restaurant.

At the San Lorenzo Valley Museum, where she is the collections manager,



SAN LORENZO VALLEY MUSEUM — CONTRIBUTED

Known as 'Wee Kirk,' the former Presbyterian church was built in 1891 by James Pierce, one of Ben Lomond's early settlers. This photo, taken about 1925, shows the back addition to the church, which is now Dr. Steven Leib's exam rooms.

Robinson said she's seen an uptick of visitors who have bought Victorian homes and are seeking historic photos to aid their remodel.

"These types of build-

ings really rebuild the community," Robinson said. "They've been around for over 100 years, 120 years. I think people are becoming more aware this is part of the valley's history."