

Good neighbors

An intergenerational setting supports youths as they transition out of foster care into adulthood



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You might think senior citizens would shudder at the thought of a throng of teenagers and 20-somethings moving in down the block, but the so-called “elders” at the Bridge Meadows affordable housing community in North Portland are welcoming them with open arms.

“I just want to offer them love,” said elder Patty Juravic, as she sat outside the Bridge Meadows during a recent “Happiness Hour.”

Happiness Hour is a weekly event in the Bridge Meadows central gathering room, where the seniors mingle with their younger neighbors who adopted through the foster system.

“Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday to you...” sang the residents on a recent Wednesday afternoon to recognize that month’s birthdays. One of the elders who works in the kitchen helped serve cake as excited children ran in and out of the room.

But beginning this week, things are changing at Bridge Meadows, which opened its doors in 2011. The community is making room for at least 15 new faces – all foster youth who are transitioning out of the foster care system. This intentional community, with support and outreach services for foster youths, is believed to be the first of its kind in the nation.

The first to move in, 20-year-old Zahra, just finished settling into an apartment at the newly-constructed Dorothy Lemelson House, on North Dana Avenue, just one block from Bridge Meadows, where the elders and young families reside.

“I fell completely in love when I first saw it,” said Zahra, a third-year student at Portland Community College.

The Dorothy Lemelson House is home to the New Meadows Project in partnership with New Avenues for Youth, and Zahra (who uses the pronoun they) was a speaker at its groundbreaking.

“I got to meet everyone and was really excited,” they said. “I think it (New Meadows) creates a sense

of community for foster youth, especially for those who never got a chance to experience that while moving from house to house and never getting to know our neighbors.”

Bridge Meadows Executive Director Derenda Schubert said partnering with New Avenues for Youth is the best way to offer young people the benefits from both organizations in one location.

“What we’re hoping is to leverage the power of intergenerational relationships by giving the youth support with education, employment and housing,” Schubert said. “We can give them support in building beneficial, long-term relationships.”

Juravic and other elders at Bridge Meadows are eager to reach out to the new tenants. As a former real estate agent, she sympathizes with the challenges these youths face, and it’s not just steep rent.

“Eighteen years old and it’s goodbye and good luck? I mean, what chance do they have?” Juravic said.

She and the elders are doing what they can to make the move easier. They helped stock the youths’ new community kitchen, and many elders are ready to help with babysitting if any of the new tenants have children.

“We’ll say ‘come on over.’ We’ll have something to eat and get to know them,” said Juravic.

Innovative Collaboration

It is not often that two established organizations – Bridge Meadows and New Avenues for Youth – would agree to combine services to create a joint project of this magnitude, according to Sean Suib, New Avenues for Youth Executive Director. The New Meadows project took five years of work by the organizations’ boards and leadership teams, and cost \$3.4 million, with \$1.4 million in city funding. Suib said the project is essential for youths who have spent years in a paternalistic foster care system.

“They often find themselves at the end of the road, without any natural social capital relationships that they can rely on, to help with what we know is a much longer journey to adulthood than just a ‘hey, you’ll figure it out,’” Suib said.

New Avenues for Youth has an established program to help youth transitioning out of foster care called PDX Connect.

Suib said it provides a whole list of services, including case management, on-the-job skills training and assistance with college preparation and execution.

“What we know about young people is there are all kinds of different flavors of what they need, and what they’re interested in, and what they’re ready for,” said Suib. “So it’s about having this sort of menu of options.”

At the Dorothy Lemelson house, New Avenues for Youth is providing that menu of services as well as an on-site resident assistant with a background in social services, and a master’s level counselor, whose office is located right next to the New Meadows community living room and kitchen.

Suib said the role of the case worker will be to work with the foster youths on their transition to



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— ZAHRA
NEW MEADOWS RESIDENT