

independent living. Even millennials who are raised by their biological parents are struggling to find independence by their late 20s, Suib said, but to their advantage, they have their parents' home as a safety net.

"If that's the reality of what it takes economically and emotionally for young people to transition to adulthood, on what planet do we think young people can do that on their own at the age of 18, when they've been in systems of care that foster dependency?" Suib said.

The 10 studio and five one-bedroom apartments at the Dorothy Lemelson house are not rent-free. Residents, aged 17 to 25, will be expected to pay what they can on an increasing scale, be enrolled in college or working a job, and participate in an embedded savings fund for their future, which will grow larger the longer the youth stay with the program.

"There isn't a designated X amount of time (they can stay,) because different people take different time to launch," Suib said. "On the other side, this isn't permanent supported housing."

Suib said two, part-time "engagement specialists" will help the new residents connect with the elders and families at Bridge Meadows, as well as the larger community around them.

"The hope is that these young people build relationships and connections to the Bridge Meadows community which last for life," said Suib.

"There's always that connection, that they can come back on Thanksgiving," Suib said. "Further, I'd say, the hope is that many of those young people would wind up living in the surrounding community permanently."

Bridge Meadows leaders say that without the help of projects like this, the statistics are dismal. According to the National Foster Youth Institute, 20 percent of youths who leave foster care at 18 become instantly homeless, and many more are at risk in the immediate years after aging out of the system. Former foster youth are also statistically more likely to face substance abuse, unemployment, incarceration and early parenthood.

Zahra said foster children realize that if they don't do well in care, they're at risk of an unsure future. "We definitely know, if we mess up, there's a chance we can mess up our entire lives."

Role of Elders

Directors from both agencies say one of the key components to making this community work is the elders' participation. Before moving into Bridge Meadows, seniors commit to 100 hours of "engagement" (per quarter) with the younger members of the community. However, staff there say most elders go well beyond that time requirement.

"It's a lot less transactional than it sounds," said Alicia Boggio-Hair, a resource development associate with Bridge Meadows who toured Street Roots around the community. "It's more organic and just happens."

The elders choose their interaction levels. Some help in the laundry room, read to youngsters in the library, help care for children in the lounge or assist in the shared garden.

Others, like Mary Johnson, take it a step further. "I never had an inkling I'd be doing



PHOTOS BY LIBBY DOWSETT

The Dorothy Lemelson House is the home of the New Meadows Project, providing apartments for foster youth aging out of the system. New Meadows was created in partnership with Bridge Meadows housing community and New Avenues for Youth. Below, Patty Juravic, a resident at Bridge Meadows, cleans up children's toys in the community room.

academics with children, I just thought I was here to babysit," Johnson laughed.

Johnson is a retired school teacher who taught at the same school that once stood at the sight of Bridge Meadows on North Wayland Avenue. "I do academics with the kids during the day, and the night is all me," said Johnson.

Johnson tutors her neighbors' two grandchildren Reba and Lydia, but her "engagement" goes well beyond the simple lessons. She attends their recitals, science expos, church and even a recent primary school graduation.

"I just look out for them and make sure they're safe around here," said Johnson, as she spotted one of the children meandering out of Happiness Hour.

Johnson decided she wanted to be a teacher when she was in grade school. She spent time with a developmentally-disabled family friend and was surprised when she noticed him repeatedly, breaking potato chips with a rocking chair. Up until that point, she didn't know anything about autism, but right then, decided she wanted to help people.

"God put me here," said Johnson. "I wouldn't be here if he didn't say this is where you're supposed to be."

Johnson admitted she doesn't keep track of the hours she spends with the children, but she knows she's blown past the time requirements. Now, with the New Meadows program beginning, she sees more opportunities to interact with young people.

"They probably can show me some stuff, especially about those computers and stuff," Johnson joked.

Win-Win Relationships

The architects of this community say the benefits of intergenerational living go both ways. As the elders donate their time and effort, they also reap the rewards of finding new purpose in life.

"Now I have a reason to get up in the morning and not wear my pajamas and watch the Price is Right all day. That is a quote from an elder," said Schubert.



She believes many elder residents are looking for a sense of family. They want to belong to something bigger than themselves. Whether that means being a friendly neighbor or a stand-in grandmother, Schubert said the elders will gradually make those connections with the New Meadows youth.

"It's not the stage of life where you hang out with your grandma too much. But over time, we think relationships will be built," said Schubert. "The elders and the parents here are being very understanding and respectful, in that it's going to take time," said Schubert.

Zahra is eager to create lasting bonds with the elders and other families. "My family is Middle Eastern, and we believe it's important to take care of our elders," Zahra said. "We should never be too busy for them."

"It does make everything a little easier having a person you can talk to, or keep you company, or do classes with ..." said Zahra.

Those at Bridge Meadows say there is another bonus for elders who take the time to build strong relationships with community members. Staff members say, by avoiding isolation and loneliness, the elders may see better results at the doctor's office.

"Elders have shared with us their health has stabilized or improved due to fact they have something to do every day," said Schubert. "Antidotally, they've told us their doctors have said that as well. We just need to get that on tape."

She further cites a 2015 Brigham Young

University psychiatric study in which researchers found loneliness and social isolation can be as dangerous as smoking 15 cigarettes a day (Holt-Lunstad.)

The elders seem to get it. Bridge Meadows has a two-to-three year waiting list for seniors wanting to move into one of the elder units. Management is scrambling to open new communities around the area to keep up with demand, but at this point, they say, they can't build them fast enough.

Expanding the Concept

Those behind the concept of Bridge Meadows and the New Meadows project in the Portsmouth Neighborhood say this development is just the beginning. Bridge Meadows already opened a second intergenerational community in Beaverton. And a third location, in the Rosewood Neighborhood of East Portland, is now in the works.

Both the Portsmouth and Beaverton locations are based on the same model. Elder, family and youth housing units interspersed around a central courtyard. Both facilities include a community room with a kitchen, various gathering areas, a library and art spaces.

This model is the first of its kind in the nation, according to Suib. "It's ideas like these that are outside the box of what's happening now," he said.

"I think they are the most promising things we have to help young people have a different outcome to this unfortunate experience of being in care," Suib said. "It's the coolest project ever, and everyone should be talking about it."

As for expanding beyond Oregon, the Bridge Meadows team has provided consultation for various outside projects, but Schubert said they are waiting to see how the in-state communities fare before crossing state lines to build new communities. At this point, she sees initial success.

"Children are talking about feeling safe," said Schubert, "that they have friends and forever families. We've started to watch their mental health conditions stabilize."

"We've watched parents say, they couldn't parent without the help of the community," said Schubert, "... and we've watched elders say, 'Wow, I'm not invisible anymore, and I get to live with meaning and purpose.'"

As the new residents move into the Dorothy Lemelson House, staff intends to take it slowly. They want small groups moving in at a time to allow tenants to get to know each other and bond, before the next group arrives. It's the organizations' intent to let residents feel out these relationships for themselves to come up with their own design.

"We think it will look like whatever brings joy to their hearts," said Schubert.

Zahra hopes to live at the Dorothy Lemelson House for about a year, as they finish up an Associate's Degree. NAFY also helped Zahra get an interview for a part-time job at the nearby New Seasons Market. Zahra's long-term goal is to help other foster youth, quite possibly, by working at the same location where Zahra is living now.

For more information on the New Meadows Project, Bridge Meadows and New Avenues for Youth go to: bridgemeadows.org/our-work/new-meadows. newavenues.org/