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Apple Patch offers adults with mental retardation homes of their own in Crestwood

Integrated subdivision set up for adults with mental retardation

By Andrea Uhde

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Michelle Porter proudly showed off the bedroom of her new Crestwood home, where butterfly sheets covered a perfectly made bed, and pastel-colored butterflies decorated the walls.

"I did it all myself," she informed guests recently touring the home, in a new Oldham County development where "doing it yourself" is part of a mission.

Porter, 38, is one of a dozen adults with mental retardation who have moved to Celebration Park, a single-family home subdivision on Ky. 329 that's designed for a mix of adults with mental retardation and other families.

It's the first of its kind in Kentucky and a rarity in the nation, say experts in the field of developmental disabilities.

"This certainly sounds innovative and exemplary," said George Jesien, executive director of the Association of University Centers on Disabilities. "If it's not the first (in the nation), it's certainly one of the first and a very, very important step forward."

While integrated housing is an emerging trend, "it's still far from a common practice," agreed Ann O'Hara of Technical Assistance Collaborative, a nonprofit group that supports such efforts.

Rick McQuady of the Kentucky Housing Corp. said his agency has worked with several projects that blend disabled people into the community, but the majority are duplex or triplex units.

When it's finished in a few years, Celebration Park -- initiated by local developer Mike Jones and Apple Patch, a nonprofit group in Crestwood that provides support and therapy for 125 adults with mental retardation -- will have 76 single-family homes, 10 of them for adults with mental retardation.

Later, perhaps by the end of next year, builders will start on Independence Park, an adjacent subdivision with 42 patio homes, six of them for adults with mental retardation.

Apple Patch will own the homes for the mentally retarded adults and rent each to three residents, who will be supervised by 24-hour staff.

Experts say such integrated communities help disabled adults build natural support systems, expose them to a broader range of people and strengthen their self-worth.

They also help to fill a major void in Kentucky, where many of the roughly 3,000 disabled people on a waiting list for services are in need of housing, said Donovan Fornwalt, director of governmental affairs for the Council on Mental Retardation in Louisville.

How it all began

Apple Patch was formed in 1988 by parents who wanted to ensure their mentally retarded children would always have a support system and a place to live, said Joe Spoelker, the group's development director.

Two of those parents, Frank Otte of Frank Otte Nursery & Garden Centers, and his late wife Peggy, gave Apple Patch the land for the housing developments, about 47 acres in all.

In 2004, Apple Patch partnered with Jones, of Jordan River Development, to plan the two developments, known collectively as The Parks at Apple Patch.

The Oldham County Planning and Zoning Commission approved the plans in 2005.

Eight homes built so far

The Apple Patch homes are 2,200-square-foot, three-bedroom houses that are worth about \$275,000 each, Spoelker said.

Other homes will range from 2,300 to 2,500 square feet and cost between \$325,000 and \$375,000, Jones said.

So far, eight homes in Celebration Park have been built, four of them for Apple Patch. An Oldham County couple bought a fifth house, and three others are on the market.

There's also a nondenominational chapel, gazebo, a pavilion and space for a park in the subdivision.

There's space for some businesses, where they hope some of the residents, who have mild to severe disabilities, could work.

Spoelker said Apple Patch envisions an active community, with movie nights at the chapel and outdoor concerts in the gardens.

"There's even discussion of having an activities coordinator," and a community center, he said. Residents "can just walk over and enjoy what's going on."

The development is just off Interstate 71, and less than a mile from a TARC park-and-ride station. Builder Gene Grieshaber said working on houses in Celebration Park helped him decide to build a house there for his family.

"I've never built any homes for anybody that's been that gratifying," said Grieshaber, who's built about 100 homes in his career. "They're loving, caring people. To be part of a community like that is just unbelievable."

Otte's son David lived with him for about 38 years before moving into an Apple Patch home.

"They like their independence," Frank Otte said. "It's surprising how well he's matured out there, and

how he's come to accept living on his own."

A whole new direction

Apple Patch, which has been renting eight homes in Crestwood for its clients, originally planned to build group homes on the property donated by the Ottes.

But, "that's an outdated model," Spoelker said. "We needed to have our folks in a community, part of a neighborhood."

It was also possible to get Medicaid funding with the current concept, he said.

For its 10 homes in Celebration Park, Apple Patch received \$2.34 million in federal tax credits and \$1.1 million in loans with the Federal Home Loan Bank.

It also got discounts on some building supplies and landscaping, and volunteers built the nearby chapel, for which Apple Patch received donations.

"We knew we were doing something different," Spoelker said. "As this has evolved, we've received phone calls (from) around the country."

Among the callers was Cheryl Kuchna, president of Jacob's Village, a residential community for adults with disabilities in Evansville, Ind.

Kuchna said Celebration Park is one of several models they're looking at for their development, which will blend housing for seniors and people with special needs.

"I think it provides people with disabilities an opportunity to live in a community like anyone else would be able to do," she said of Apple Patch's development.

Hurdles might be help

Both Apple Patch and the project's developers say they realize the subdivision could be a tough sell among some potential buyers, especially those who've not previously had much interaction with disabled people.

"It'll be some adjustment for the homeowners, but as the generation coming out of school today gets older, we just don't think it's going to be as big a deal," Spoelker said.

But if everyone sees the subdivision the way Jones does, it won't be a problem.

"I just couldn't imagine anyone who met our clients who would not want to live next to them," he said.

And if there are difficulties, Spoelker said, that might actually be beneficial for the disabled residents.

"One of the reasons the parents originally wanted the closed campus idea is you keep them safe," he said. "But we have come to realize ... you have to prepare them."

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