

Apartments' goal: Change lives



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(Photo: The Enquirer/Amanda Rossmann)

Story Highlights

- Lack of affordable housing in Clermont led Terrace Park church to start Thomaston Woods
- More than 600 former apartment resident families have become homeowners
- Social worker on site runs programs for children and adults
- Planned \$5 million renovation could begin this summer

BATAVIA TWP. – Administrators of the Thomaston Woods apartment complex were glad to see the Pegoli family go.

It's not that Tony and Becky Pegoli, both 34, and their 7-year-old daughter Stella were bad tenants. Just the opposite; most rental properties would love them to stay as long as possible.

The 100-unit Thomaston complex near Amelia isn't a typical rental property, though, in terms of how it came to be, services it provides or how it measures success. The Pegolis are an example of that success; they became first-time homeowners last month with the purchase of a house in Anderson Township.

"Our intention was for families to live here awhile to save money and be able to purchase their own homes. We've had well over 600 families through the course of 24 years who have gone on to homeownership," said Tina Lytle, Thomaston's director of resident services.

And now, Thomaston Woods is close to closing on a financing deal for a \$5 million renovation that will serve a new generation of families who need safe, quality, affordable housing as a bridge to homeownership. If all goes as planned, work will begin this summer.

“The idea was always that you would come (to Thomaston Woods) to change your life,” said the Rev. Darren Elin, rector since 2010 of St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Terrace Park.

That life-changing idea was born in the late 1980s when St. Thomas members saw a need for affordable housing for low-income families in Clermont County. The congregation created the nonprofit St. Thomas Housing Corp. and tapped government and private funding sources to finance construction of Thomaston Woods, a \$5 million project that opened in 1990, 14 miles from the church.

Since then, the complex has operated in the black and has maintained a 96 percent occupancy rate, Elin said. The church has no ongoing financial commitment, but its members volunteer their time and talents to the complex and its residents.

In 2007, the church of 400 households opened a second nonprofit housing development for seniors, the 13-unit Thomaston Meadows. Unlike Thomaston Woods, it is a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development property, with rental costs based on income.

It’s not out of the ordinary for a diocese, composed of many churches, to take on a project like Thomaston Woods, Elin said. But, “It’s unusual that a (single) parish has the individual members who have a passion for it, and that has the resources to say, ‘Let’s dig into our time and talent and really make this happen.’”

“It was intended to be more than just an apartment community from the get-go.”

As resident services director the past 14 years, Lytle, a social worker, oversees programs for children and adults. She helps kids in the community center’s homework room. She runs a weekly children’s Bible study and craft group, as well as summer programs for preschoolers, elementary students and teens. She’s a referral resource for people who need outside agencies for counseling and the like. She can tap a discretionary fund when residents need help with rent or utilities.

The affordable rent drew the Pegoli family to Thomaston Woods about six years ago. But their dream, always, was to be homeowners some day.

They learned in January, along with other residents, about the planned renovation. A deal is in the works to finance it through the Ohio Housing Finance Agency using tax credits and a \$300,000 grant from the Federal Home Loan Bank of Cincinnati. St. Thomas Housing Corp. also has partnered with Model Group and Episcopal Retirement Homes.

The OHFA requirements stipulate that families living in the renovated complex must not earn more than 60 percent of median income for Clermont County.

Becky Pegoli, a chef at an Anderson Township restaurant, and her husband, a server/bartender at an Eastgate eatery, are above the income limit, along with 32 other families.

“It was a shell shock: We have to move?” Becky said. But for the Pegolis, shock soon turned to excitement.

Families no longer eligible to live in Thomaston Woods will have two options once the OHFA financing plan is approved. If they move to a more expensive apartment, they will receive the difference in monthly rent for 42 months. If they buy a house, they receive a lump sum to help with a down payment. In both cases, families' moving expenses are paid.

The Pegolis chose to become homeowners. Once a minor credit problem was resolved, their loan was approved, they said.

Because the OHFA financing plan is not yet finalized, St. Thomas Housing Corp. and its ministry partners advanced the down payment and moving costs.

"This was the best place for us," Tony Pegoli said, sitting in the screened-in porch of his Anderson Township home.

Shannon Robinson, 39, decided that, at least for now, Thomaston Woods is still the best place for her and her children, ages 11 and 8. It's been their home for seven years.

"I feel safe here, being a single mom. My kids love it here," she said. Her children participate in the Thomaston summer program, and Robinson, a full-time student at University of Cincinnati Clermont College, is one of about 30 residents who have received Thomaston Woods scholarships the past five years.

The scholarship will help her earn a medical assisting certificate, then work toward an associate's degree.

Getting a job in the medical field could allow her to save enough money to someday join the ranks of former Thomaston residents who have become homeowners. ■

Golf event to raise funds

The eighth-annual Thomaston Golf Classic will be May 19 at The Golf Club at Stonelick Hills in Stonelick Township, Clermont County. Organizers are still looking for sponsorships. The tournament is a fundraiser for the Thomaston Woods Scholarship Fund, which bestows scholarships to residents of Thomaston Woods apartments. Information: 513-752-1594. Registration: stthomasepiscopal.org.