

Rainbow Opportunities: Rainbow Village helps the developmentally disabled live independently

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When Betty, Pat and Phyllis moved this weekend into their new home on a quiet residential street in Florissant, they experienced a big change.

For the first time, the three women who have developmental disabilities are living on their own.

The women (whose full names aren't being disclosed for privacy purposes) set up housekeeping in a home purchased by Rainbow Village, a nonprofit organization that provides housing and recreational facilities for people who have developmental disabilities.

"They just want to be good neighbors," said Jo-Ann Goldstein, Rainbow Village's associate director of development. "We provide an opportunity for people to live in the community, be part of the neighborhood and enjoy their lives."

Over the last three decades, Rainbow Village has purchased 46 homes throughout the metro area. Nine are in North County: two in Hazelwood, six in Florissant and one in Bridgeton.

"The need is huge," Goldstein said. "Five hundred people are on the waiting list (for independent living). We hope to open three homes a year for the next three years. And we hope to work with people from Bellefontaine Habilitation Center. There are 120 who could qualify."

Rainbow Village purchases a home by obtaining down-payment assistance from the St. Louis County Productive Living Board, which oversees tax dollars that have been earmarked for the developmentally disabled.

The occupants pay rent with their Social Security income, which can be supplemented by employment income. The three women in the Florissant home are paying \$300 to \$400 each in monthly rent.

To succeed at this endeavor, the women also are receiving 24-hour home support services from Life Skills Foundation. Life Skills, a nonprofit organization, teaches individuals skills such as cooking and grocery shopping so they can live independently.

Rainbow Village also provides home maintenance support.

John, a resident of a Rainbow Village home in Olivette, visited the Florissant home prior to the women moving in. He scanned the ready-to-move-in interior, asking questions about the basement and the washer and dryer that had not yet arrived.

He recalled his own move in 1999 out of his parents' Clayton apartment and into the home he shares with his roommate, Claude.

"I go anyplace I want to," he said, explaining that McDonald's is one of his favorite places. "I know the manager."

John rides the bus to shop and browse at area stores. He volunteers one day a week at a local church, and he swims and exercises at a gym on a regular basis. He also takes drama classes in preparation for his part in a spring production of "The Wizard of Oz" at the Jewish Community Center.

"We want people to age in place," Goldstein said. "It's very hard for anyone to move, but for people with disabilities, it's very difficult."

Neighbor Jennifer Wilbanks said she thinks the women's move into the Florissant home is a good thing.

"We welcome new neighbors to the neighborhood," she said.