

Nun sees fallow townhomes in Tampa as perfect spot for her foster family village



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TAMPA

She wanted to build the village in her back yard, on those 72 empty acres behind her mobile home in Thonotosassa.

Engineers had surveyed the land. Architects had drawn plans. Two couples already had signed up to be parents.

Brochures advertised the nun's vision: an "Intergenerational Community of Caring" where 40 foster kids could find families and 36 senior citizens could become surrogate grandparents and everyone would help one another and live in new homes.

Sister Claire LeBoeuf saw a chapel in the pasture, a community center and sewing room and basketball courts on those fields filled with palmettos.

For five years, she had been trying to build the dream. She talked to church groups and Rotary clubs, wrote Jodie Foster and former Bucs coach Tony Dungy, begged 700 potential donors. She hoped to raise \$50 million for the project. But by last spring, she only had \$20,000.

"Then I got sick," she said. "It was the best thing that could have happened for New Life Village."

In June, the 69-year-old Sister of Holy Cross got a new kidney, donated by another nun. While she was recovering, the village's board of directors decided it would be too expensive to build on the swampy Thonotosassa property. Grading the land and running power and water lines would cost \$2 million before they could even begin construction.

In September, a board member — who is also a real estate agent — sent Sister Claire an email.

A cluster of new townhomes in Tampa had just been foreclosed on.

The message ended: This could be your new New Life Village.

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Claire LeBoeuf grew up on a farm in New Hampshire and enjoyed an idyllic childhood until she was 13, when her mother died. Her dad remarried the next year, but she said her stepmom seldom talked to her, made her feel unwelcome in her own home.

In 1960, at age 17, she joined the convent and became Sister Claire. She was searching, she said, for a new family.

"I know how awful it is not to feel like you belong," she said. "Everyone should have a place they know they're wanted."

She earned a master's degree in counseling. Taught middle and high school. In 1985, she moved onto the isolated acreage in Thonotosassa to oversee a group of mothers struggling to regain custody of their children.

Later, on that same property, she supervised a foster care center called Everyday Blessings. Today, 28 children still live there in dormitories with seven counselors. Sister Claire watches them from her window, feeling guilty she hasn't been able to help them find families.

Her idea is to encourage couples to adopt older children, teenagers or groups of siblings — the most difficult ones to place. New Life Village would offer incentives: One parent could stay home and earn up to \$20,000 to take care of the children. Seniors would be nearby to help with babysitting and tutoring, yard work and baking. If they volunteered at least six hours a week, their rent would be reduced. Everyone would contribute. Everyone would benefit.

"When I think of how long those children have been waiting for permanent homes, how much time has been lost . . ." Her voice trailed off, then came back strong. "For five years we have been working on building everything from the ground up.

"All that time, these townhomes were empty, ready, waiting for us."

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The nun's new vision is a crescent of two-story buildings, 30 doors spread over almost 12 acres, surrounding a clubhouse and swimming pool — with room for a baseball field out back.

The walls already are painted — sand and mustard, peach and avocado. The shutters have been hung. All the windows are in.

A Miami builder started the project but abandoned it before the insides were finished. Staircases are unpainted; sinks sit in boxes. "They just shut down everything in a hurry," said Sister Claire.

The development is off 50th Street, just over a mile from the Selmon Expressway. From the metal gate outside the entrance, you can hear the highway. Warehouses line the property instead of palmettos. The neighborhood is industrial — not nearly the pastoral setting the nun had pictured.

"But I have to let that go," she said. "I have to start thinking, how can we make this work?"

Maybe if potential parents only had to adopt two foster kids instead of four, the new family could fit into the two-bedroom townhomes. Maybe they could squeeze a playground in by the clubhouse. Maybe if Sister Claire sold that Thonotosassa land, or finally raised some real money, the board could buy that unfinished development — and finally open its village.

The bank wants \$2.5 million for the townhouses. Board member Terri Benincasa estimates it will cost another \$1 million to finish the interiors. In January, the village board made an offer, which is still being negotiated.

"If the bank accepts our bid, we could be up and running in six months," Benincasa said.

"We need to go ahead and try making new families," said Sister Claire. "I want to start moving them in this year."

The nun is not supposed to pray for money. Not even for a charitable project.

So every morning, before she gets out of bed, she pictures children playing around those new townhomes, surrounded by parents and grandparents and neighbors they know love them.

And she prays "for a large donor with a big heart who believes every kid deserves a chance."

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How to help

For more information about New Life Village, go to newlifevillage.org, call (813) 924-1922, email EveryBless@aol.com or write to New Life Village, 13133 St. Francis Lane, Thonotosassa, FL 33592.

On the Web

To see previous stories about New Life Village, go to links.tampabay.com.

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