

Benito Link

A Home for Thanksgiving

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After years of instability, neighbors enjoy a simple meal together, capturing the sentiment of Thanksgiving.



Luis (left), Pete (right) and Gerald in the foreground, enjoy the holiday spirit at home in the Buena Vista development. Photo by Robert Eliason



Kim, who offered to be the host, displays the product of all her efforts, a home baked turkey. Photo by Robert Eliason



The new Buena Vista apartments are on the 800 block of Buena Vista in Hollister. Photo by Robert Eliason

For years they lived with the pain and instability of sometimes crippling mental health burdens and homelessness.

This week, for the first time in a long time, they all sat down to a home cooked Thanksgiving dinner in brand new, permanent housing built just for them.

Kim did the cooking and hosted the four others, now neighbors, at her new home at Buena Vista Apartments.

Never mind that at the age of 47 she is schizophrenic and bipolar, holiday shopping and cooking for the Tuesday afternoon dinner made her a bit nervous, she conceded, just like other hosts preparing for the holiday meal.

Monse Salazar-Martin, a mental health worker who helps Kim, said what the woman has accomplished is nothing short of “amazing.

“She’s doing all the shopping and prepping for the Thanksgiving feast, she cleaned her apartment and she’s making the turkey and pumpkin pie,” said Salazar-Martin.

“She’s doing great. And if she ever needs any support, that is what we are here for.”

One other thing Salazar wants people to know about Kim is that “She volunteered, and that is a big step. We didn’t want to push (being the host and cook) on anybody, but when I put it out on the table, Kim was the first one to take the offer; it’s a great feeling.”

The bright and airy complex where Kim cooked her turkey with fixings was opened last month by CHISPA, the Salinas-based nonprofit, affordable housing company.

It built the units in partnership with the San Benito County Behavioral Health Department and nearly \$1 million of Prop. 63 funds allocated to the county for just such use.

“We always wanted to assist our clients to attain safe and affordable housing,” said Nancy Abellera, the supervising case manager who encouraged the five clients to apply for the housing once the project was approved.

“When they have their basic needs met in terms of housing, recovery can be so much smoother,” she said.

“Each client has a story to tell of how far they have individually come in their mental health recovery to get to a point they can live independently,” said Nancy Abellera, supervising case manager for behavioral health.

Kim had been living with family, which Abellera concedes was not an ideal situation with her mental health challenges.

Now she gets by with a little help from her friends and lots of intense support from a team of behavioral health workers and counselors who provide assistance 24/7.

Help comes in many forms and includes cooking lessons and tips on how to shop and get along with neighbors – the basics so many people take for granted but that signal major successes for Kim and her friends, officials said.

Other clients came from more urgent housing situations. Take Luis, for example. At 65, he struggled with depression and was forced on his very limited income to live in a squalid, rat-infested trailer off Fairview Road in Hollister before being chosen for one of the coveted new apartments.

He shares a modern but modest two-bedroom unit with his nephew, Gerald, 36, who also receives services from the county health workers.

Living with a relative makes it a much better experience, said Luis, who’s still getting used to having a front door people can actually knock on and not having to contend with rodents.

SBCBHD case management supervisor Maria Sanchez has helped guide the housing project to completion from the beginning and said it’s a outgrowth of the agency’s commitment to the goal of independent living for its clients.

Indeed, she reminded, voter-approved Prop. 63 was designed to fund projects for the mentally ill by imposing a one percent tax on incomes in excess of \$1 million.

And the housing built with the county's share to date of those funds is meant to be permanent, 30 years-plus, Sanchez said.

As long as clients follow the rules and pay their rent, they can stay, officials said.

Each pays his or her own rent from their social security disability payments, according to Abellera.

Another member of this unique community is Pete, 67, a native of Arizona who grew up in Morgan Hill, earned an associates degree in art from Gavilan Community College and held a series of jobs while living in Hollister for several decades before falling on tough times.

One day, he said, "I just kind of lost it, I was put in lockdown a couple of times, I just couldn't deal with (life)."

Enter SBCBHD counselor Jose Prieto, who Pete credited with getting him back on a good track.

"If it wasn't for Jose Prieto, I would still be on the streets. But things are back to where they should be; life is good, it's fantastic. It all came around, thank God."

Pete spends his days on long walks, exploring new places, like the hill near his new home, picking walnuts and getting together with his brother and sister, who live in town.

"If it wasn't for this (housing), I'd be in a ditch, you know what I mean," he said.

During times on the street, he recalled, "I kept thinking to myself, Pete, what are you doing out here? You are a fairly well educated guy, look at you; it (was) just hard to accept that I was down there."

Now, he said, all that has changed.

"These are my golden years and I thought I would be living in the back of a truck. But now that I have this place, I have attained Nirvana, my friend."



About:

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Jack Foley is a veteran journalist on the BenitoLink team. Foley is a Pulitzer co-winner for the San Jose Mercury News staff's coverage of the Loma Prieta Earthquake. He was also nominated for a Pulitzer by the Center for Public Interest Law for a highly-lauded series that exposed California's lax policing of bad doctors. He is an experienced investigative reporter who worked for the San Jose Mercury News for more than 20 years. Foley covered San Benito County news on and off throughout his professional career. In addition to his more than three decades in journalism as a reporter, photojournalist and editor, Foley also has taught news writing at Gavilan College, worked in the nonprofit, affordable housing field, including in San Benito County, and has done high level public affairs work for NASA.

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