

A BETTER PLACE

The San Jose Mission apartments are a welcome change for farm workers used to substandard, crowded housing.

By JANET ZINK
August 29, 2003



Veronica Becerra, sits with her two children, Juan Capule, 1 and Wendy, 4, as they spend the final moments in their old Plant City home before moving to a new apartment in Dover.



Becerra unpacks kitchen items as Juan calls his sister Wendy, to feel the cool air coming from the ceiling vent.

DOVER - It's moving day for the Capule family. Juan Capule carries in tables and lamps while Veronica Becerra puts pots and pans in kitchen cabinets. Their children, Juan, 1, and Wendy, 4, run excitedly from room to room.

Sunlight flows through the windows but the central air conditioning cools the apartment. Both mark a huge improvement over their previous digs in a dark Plant City apartment that had no air conditioning, a paint-spattered bathtub, leaky ceilings, few windows and light fixtures that the landlord refused to repair. The couple paid \$350 a month to live in the 2-bedroom, 1-bathroom home.



Mike Gomez, 8, and his brother Donisio, 9, race in the courtyard of the San Jose Mission apartments, where the family recently moved after having lived in a mobile home.

The Capules, who work in local fields and packing houses, in August became one of the first families to move into the new farm worker family apartments at San Jose Mission off Martin Luther King Boulevard, west of McIntosh Road. They'll pay \$495 a month for the 3-bedroom, 2-bathroom home.



Donisio Gomez, helps Isabel Gomez, 3, as she sits on the seat of a bicycle that Mike Gomez tries to keep stable as they play in the back yard of their parents Dover mobile home.

The apartments at San Jose Mission are the first project to be completed with \$9.1-million from the U.S. Department of Agriculture earmarked for farm worker housing in Florida. Hillsborough County also contributed \$1-million to the San Jose Mission as part of a larger effort to improve farm worker housing in the southern part of the county, which

Amada Carbajal cleans the kitchen counter of her new home at the San Jose Mission off of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard in Dover.



has the highest concentration of Hillsborough's 18,000 farm workers. "Our Board of County Commissioners wanted to take a look at what we could do to help the farm worker housing situation," said Dexter Barge, director of Hillsborough's Department of Community Improvement. "Throughout the county, migrant camps are tucked away all over the place. Normally, they're dilapidated mobile homes and the conditions are really bad." In the past eight years, the county has spent more than \$5.5-million on farm worker housing, said Barge.

The San Jose Mission apartments feature a Southwestern design with four buildings and courtyards where children can safely play. The apartments have large windows, walk-in closets,

outside storage, central heat and air and solid wood cabinets. Becerra saw the homes under construction while attending English language classes at San Jose Mission. She applied to move in and after a visit to her home, interviews and background checks, the property manager, Everglades Community Association, approved her application. "It's a better place for my kids," she said. They'll attend the mission day care center and she will have easy access to her English classes.

Becerra's sister, Amada Carbajal, and her husband, Gilberto Gomez, who work for Kerby's Nursery on Parsons Avenue, also moved into the San Jose Mission in August with their six children. They left a tiny trailer with no air conditioning that cost \$600 a month for a 4-bedroom, 2 1/2-bath apartment that rents for \$545 a month. "They're beautiful homes. There are places for kids to play," said Carmen Roqueta, director of Tenant Services for Everglades Community Association, which manages farm worker housing properties throughout Florida. "No one can ever believe that's housing for farm workers."

So far, 10 families have been accepted into the 80 units at San Jose Mission. Future plans call for another 46 apartments and a community center. The 34-acre San Jose Mission opened 10 years ago when the Catholic Diocese of St. Petersburg donated the land and assigned Catholic Charities, its social service arm, to develop programs for farm workers.

Facilities on the site include a day care center for 90 children operated by the Redlands Christian Migrant Association; an adult education and literacy program run by Hillsborough County schools; a nurse provided by St. Joseph's/Baptist Hospital; and a food and clothing pantry operated by the St. Vincent dePaul Society. Catholic Charities offers counseling and case management for families and individuals. The idea to build housing for farm worker families there was born about seven years ago when Catholic Charities commissioned a study that found that 1,310 farm worker families live in substandard conditions in Hillsborough County within the area served by the San Jose Mission.

Focus groups organized by Catholic Charities revealed housing as the No. 1 issue, said Arnold Andrews, executive director of Catholic Charities. Families, in particular, talked about discrimination and the difficulty of finding a place to live. "It's better for a person who owns a trailer to rent it to eight single males and collect \$1,200 a month instead of renting it to a family and getting \$450," Andrews said. "There was a built-in economic bias." Farmers who rent trailers on their property, Andrews said, prefer to rent to strong young men without families. That means families often end up living in cars or severely overcrowded homes.

For three years, Catholic Charities sought funding, and finally received \$1-million from the Hillsborough County Community Improvement Department; a \$750,000 loan from the Federal Home Loan Association; and a \$400,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The coup came in 2001 when Florida received \$9.1-million from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. More than \$3-million went to the San Jose Mission. The remainder is paying for a dormitory for 192 single adults in Immokalee and a dormitory for 125 single adults in Ruskin.

California also got \$9.1-million that it used for one-time services rather than investing in permanent structures, said Joe Fritz of the USDA.

Alayne Unterberger, executive director of Florida Institute for Community Studies and a farm worker advocate, said, in general, farm worker housing throughout Florida is improving. But the housing at the San Jose Mission is "worth replicating". "They really put a lot of thought and effort into how they wanted this to work," she said. "It looks a village. It looks homey. It's inviting. It's place people would be proud to live. Everybody deserves that."