



Cultivating A Home

By LIZ BLEAU
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RUSKIN — Magali Perez, 25, remembers coming home from her job at a plant nursery, hoping she was next in line to use the kitchen shared by four families living under one roof. They shared one stove, so they had to cook and eat in shifts. She and her husband, Ramiro, and their five children now have their own kitchen in a bright, four-bedroom apartment in the new \$5.5 million Manatee Village farmworker housing complex off Ninth Street Southeast. The complex was built to give migrant farmworkers and other agricultural laborers decent, stable housing. It has 190 apartments for families and men who are traveling without their wife and children.

For the first 10 years the Perezes were married, they lived with Magali's parents and other relatives, along with their children, in a double-wide mobile home in Riverview. They moved into their new apartment in September and finally have some breathing room. The children used to share one bedroom. The four girls share three bedrooms now, and young Romeo, 2, sleeps in his parents' room. And Magali doesn't have to share her stove and sink.

"This feels good. This is real nice," she said. "There's no more arguing about the kitchen." Ramiro Perez, 30, who works in a tomato packing house in Tampa, likes the space and privacy. "I can do what I want, go to bed when I want," he said. "And I like having my own remote control for the TV."

The apartment complex was built by Little Manatee Housing Corp., a nonprofit group organized by Rural Neighborhoods Inc. of Homestead. The agency was formerly called Everglades Community Association. The U.S. Department of Housing, the Department of Agriculture's rural development division, the Florida Department of Community Affairs and Hillsborough County paid for the land and construction, said Rural Neighborhoods Executive Director Steve Kirk. The Department of Agriculture provides yearly assistance to keep costs low for renters, Kirk said.

The apartment complex has 62 apartments for families and 128 dormitorylike units for "unaccompanied workers," who typically migrate to different farm jobs sites. Often they are married but traveling without their wives and children. Rents at the village are

lower than market averages. In most cases, a two-bedroom apartment is \$495 a month, a three-bedroom is \$555 and a four-bedroom costs \$615.

Staying Put

More and more, Kirk said, farmworkers are choosing not to migrate and taking stable jobs to keep their children in the same school year after year. To accomplish that, husbands travel while wives work at nurseries or packing houses, or both parents get jobs that don't force them to follow the harvests. "When good, affordable housing is available, that is an encouragement for a farmworker family to no longer migrate," he said.

In Hillsborough County, many former migrants work at fish farms. According to the Florida Tropical Fish Farms Association, the Tampa area is home to most of the state's tropical fish farms. Paula Vowell, 35, is a single mother of three who works at Segrest Farms, a tropical fish breeder in Gibsonton. She moved into her Manatee Village apartment two months ago. It was the first time she had her own place since being homeless several years ago. Since then, she has lived in a women's shelter and transitional housing. "I love it here," she said. "I can afford the rent, and it's quiet. The kids have their own room. Nobody messes with you here."

Vowell learned about the new apartments from her former shelter social worker, who stood in line for Vowell for more than three hours when applications were first accepted. Vowell couldn't take time off from her job. Several months ago, on the first day applications were accepted, more than 40 people lined up to apply, property manager Anselma Fernandez said.

Playing By The Rules

Fernandez said the village's tenants are required to be responsible apartment dwellers. Approval to live there requires a visit to the family's current home. "We want to see their housekeeping," she said. "We let them know we are strict. If they are not willing to work with that, we don't want them as tenants. "We call it tough love. But it works. Families realize this is a nice place, and we expect them to respect the rules and regulations."

The complex has a playground, recreation hall and laundry room. Eventually, the rec room will have televisions and a computer, Fernandez said. A manager will live on site to help enforce the rules, including a ban on drinking alcohol in public and keeping quiet after 11 p.m. Kirk said traditionally farmworkers have been offered the "last and least" housing, meaning they get the worst-quality housing and often pay more than other tenants in better housing.

"With this type of good housing, a family may decide, even if they don't have a job for three months while there are no crops to harvest, that they can find other work so that they can stay in their nice apartment," he said. "Farmworkers want the same things as everyone else. Their dreams for their families are the same. They want a nice home and for their kids to have a better life. "These are families who historically prefer to work than accept handouts," Kirk said. "They would have chose to move their family to Ohio for three months rather than take a handout."

People who work in the citrus, tomato or vegetables industries, packing houses, nurseries, tree farms or fish farms may be eligible to apply for an apartment at Manatee Village. For information, call (813) 649-0313.