

Immokalee affordable housing project fills up, gives families a new chance

• By ELYSA DELCORTO



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Andrea Garcia, 3, colors a picture after dumping out the contents of her backpack on the kitchen floor in the home she shares with her mom and grandpa at Eden Gardens in Immokalee. A dispute over nonpayment of building costs at Eden Gardens, a low income community, is heading to arbitration. Watermark Construction contends it's owed nearly \$600,000, however the Everglades Community Association believes Watermark was late in delivering the units.

IMMOKALEE —With crayons sprawled on the floor, 3-year-old Andrea Rodriguez tackled a halfway-completed coloring in her family's sparsely furnished living room on a recent muggy afternoon. It's been a month since the family moved from Michigan, said Andrea's mother, Heather Rodriguez, and they're still settling into their new lives in Florida. It's been an adjustment, she said, but a welcome one. "We've never lived in such a pretty place," Rodriguez, 29, said of the new two-bedroom, two-bathroom town home the family is renting at the Reserve at Eden Gardens in Immokalee. "I'm in heaven."

For Everglades Community Association and Rural Neighborhoods President Steven C. Kirk, it's about giving families a leg up. "What we hope is that families won't spend their whole lives in the project," he said. "We would like affordable housing to be a stepping stone." Florida City-based nonprofit Rural Neighborhoods has been in business since 1982 and has helped build 1,200 affordable housing apartment units in small towns throughout South Florida. Everglades Community Association is part of the nonprofit.

The nonprofit housing organization's \$16.3 million Reserves at Eden Gardens project was paid for with 14 different revenue sources, including loans and grants. The finished community includes 92 multifamily rental housing units on a 20-acre property surrounded by nature preserves. Two of Eden Gardens' three phases -- 88 units -- are targeted for people employed in agriculture, Kirk said, with four additional units set aside for formerly homeless families. Construction on the project began in 2007 and the development's first phase opened last summer. The last phase opened by fall. Now, the affordable housing community is nearly to capacity with 87 of the 92 units occupied.

Although the project did have some environmental challenges, including the relocation of some gopher tortoises, Kirk said he was happier with the results than with the process. "You come into that enclave, and you just feel a little bit more in the middle of a natural setting," he said. "A little bit of tough love also helps," he said. "We want people to have an enjoyable neighborhood and not just an enjoyable apartment," Kirk said. "We have expectations for tenants."

Tenants' homes are inspected and they are expected to maintain the inside of the unit, Kirk said, adding that parents are expected to control their children. The hope is that the tenants develop a sense of community and confidence that they can approach Eden Gardens staff if they see anything wrong, Kirk said. "You don't want a place where anything goes," Kirk said. "You have to care. You can't just take someone's rent."

In 2004, Rural Neighborhoods built 79 apartment units for agriculture employees in a project named Main Street Village at Main and 11th streets in Immokalee. "It's still very successful and very popular," Kirk said. For both developments, Kirk said, the majority of tenants have rental assistance, which bases the rent on how much they earn. "Tenants generally pay 30 percent of their monthly income toward rent and utilities ... about \$350 on average," he said. "Consequently it's affordable." It's the affordability that has meant so much to Rodriguez.

“We asked around at a lot of apartment complexes in town and finally came to ask here,” said Rodriguez, who was born in Naples but whose family moved to Michigan soon after her birth. “We found out they had vacancies and we put in an application.” Compared to where she’s lived before, Rodriguez said her new home is definitely a cut above the rest. “It’s super actually,” Rodriguez said with a smile. “Everything is so clean and the development is well-organized.” She’d also been struck by how polite and calm the small community’s residents are.

Another plus has been the number of families with kids in the neighborhood, so although the unit has a back porch, Rodriguez said Andrea always wants to play in the front. “All the neighborhood kids play outside by the front of the building, she said with a smile. “She loves to go out and play with them.” Rodriguez’s neighbor, Nieves Martinez, agreed. “The afternoon is definitely when you see all the kids get together,” said Martinez, 36, who lives in a three-bedroom, two-bathroom unit with her husband, two rambunctious toddlers and an infant. “It’s so nice that they can all play in a safe environment.”

Having lived in a trailer home before, Martinez said living in Eden Gardens has been great for her family. “Everything is so calm here,” she said while carrying her nine-month-old daughter, Enedina Gonzalez, after a meeting with Eden Gardens staff. Adjusting to Southwest Florida’s warm weather remains a work in progress, however, Rodriguez said. “People automatically think if you’re from the North you’ll love the weather,” Rodriguez said with a chuckle. “I don’t like the warm weather. Right now in Michigan it’s still cold, so I’m melting.” Rodriguez, who lives in the home with her father and Andrea, has been looking for a job since the three moved to town. She said her father, who has made the yearly trip to Southwest Florida for the harvesting season, doesn’t know if there will be work for him after the orange picking season ends. So until then, the family will take it one step at a time and enjoy their time in their new home, Rodriguez said.

“We don’t have a lot of furniture or a lot of toys,” Rodriguez said. “But right now I’m looking for a school for the little one. Things will happen little by little.”