

OUR VIEW

The Village is an inspiring success story

A first-of-its-kind housing community that has changed the lives of many of its residents has proven a whopping success, spawning others like it throughout Florida. The Arc Village, located near the Intracoastal Waterway, is an affordable and accessible complex that provides apartment dwelling and social amenities for people with developmental and intellectual disabilities. The gated community was conceived by The Arc Jacksonville and opened almost two years ago. Today 121 people live in its one- and two-bedroom apartments — and almost twice that many are on its waiting list. There are already four similar communities that have opened or will open soon in Florida — and more are in the planning stages both in this state and across the nation. As opposed to group homes that are situated within a larger neighborhood — and often have residents isolated due to their differences— The Village places similarly disabled residents in adjacent apartments. The result is a supportive community of neighbors who know and support each other, and socialize daily. Jim Whittaker, CEO of The Arc Jacksonville, is justifiably proud of the organization’s achievement. And he’s equally proud of what The Village can offer residents. “It’s a very engaged lifestyle that most of us would enjoy,” Whittaker says.

Slice of village life

Megan Bell, a 27-year-old Jacksonville woman with Down syndrome, was among the first residents to move into The Village. “I love it,” says Bell, who works as a greeter at the JAX Chamber nine hours a week. “I’ve grown and made more friends.” On any given night a visitor might find Bell cleaning her two-bedroom apartment or making dinner with her roommate. More likely, however, Bell will be eating dinner with neighbors in the community cafeteria — or meeting at friends’ apartments to watch movies or color pictures. Or she might be found participating in one of the numerous activities created for Village residents, ranging from trivia and karaoke events to workout sessions and advocacy meetings. It’s the kind of independence that Bell’s mother, Susan, had always dreamed of for her daughter. “She more independent,” her mother says.

It’s all about choices

Despite its obvious success today, The Village was an unknown commodity when it opened in April 2016. It was the first of its kind in the country, so the approach represented uncharted waters. But those waters have been ably navigated, and there’s little doubt now that The Village works. It has never had to evict a resident due to a late or nonexistent payment. In fact, 75 of its 121 residents work. And residents are thrilled with the independence and freedom provided. “It’s been over-the-top successful,” Whittaker says. Make no mistake — complexes like The Village aren’t the perfect choice for everyone with an intellectual or developmental disability. But the operative word there is “choice.” The Village is a symbol of society’s growing realization that everyone, regardless of their ability, should be able to have some choice in how they live their lives. It’s an inspiring success story that should not only be shared — it should be emulated.

Times-Union Editorial Board



The ARC Jacksonville On Campus Transition program at the University of North Florida provides an opportunity for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities to enjoy a college experience and become immersed in academic life.

[BRUCE LIPSKY/FLORIDA TIMES-UNION]