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Partnerships are helping build new homes and new starts in communities across California

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By Rachel Wolf Tulley | APPLE NEWSROOM | July 2022

At the recently opened Veterans Square housing complex in Pittsburg, California, a new community is blossoming. It's not uncommon to see residents like J.C. in the hall, serenading one of his neighbors with a gospel song, or to find Tonia in the backyard, plotting out a new

herb garden.

At the center of it all is Marcus Ferdinand, 39, the building's service coordinator. But his role is much more than that ? he is a counselor and friend to the residents at the complex, making sure they are cared for and adjusting to their new surroundings. For the vast majority, it is a world away from the streets they recently called home.

With support from Apple and Housing Trust Silicon Valley, Satellite Affordable Housing Associates recently opened Veterans Square in Pittsburg, California.

At Veterans Square, J.C. is one of the 20 veterans who now call the building home. The 85-year-old spent 20 years in the Navy as an aircraft mechanic. Most recently, he was living with a family friend, but that arrangement was coming to an end.

?I didn't know if I was going to get in, so I prayed about it,? J.C. says. ?I love my apartment. They even put me on the first floor because it's easier with my walker. That meant a lot to me.?

J.C. talks to everyone he sees in the halls and in the back garden, reserving his best jokes and quips for Ferdinand.

?Marcus is a good fella,? J.C. says. It's a sentiment echoed by many at Veterans Square.

Ferdinand is a veteran himself, having served in the Air Force, and can connect with many residents because of that shared experience. After leaving the military, Ferdinand went on to get his graduate degree in social work.

?I remember growing up in a community where there were a lot of problems,? Ferdinand says. ?I just never thought it was the way life should be for people. I feel like everyone has the potential to lead a life that they enjoy ? and for some of us, it's just harder to get there. And so if I can help someone to get to that point, it makes it all worthwhile.?

Marcus Ferdinand is the service coordinator at Veterans Square, and he connects with many of the building's residents, including J.C., through their shared military experience.

Two years ago, Ferdinand was hired by Satellite Affordable Housing Associates, which developed, owns, and manages Veterans Square ? and provides onsite services for residents.

?It's a brand-new building, so it's an opportunity for me to really help from the ground up,? he says. ?A lot of that is building a community with the residents ? introducing them to each other, having different events, and just talking to people and helping them work through the different struggles that they may have with being housed.?

That help includes services provided through the Department of Veterans Affairs, as well as sessions with social workers, therapists, and financial counselors.

Before she moved into Veterans Square in March, Tonia, 60, was living in a hotel as part of a program to help those waiting for housing stay off the streets. Now she has a one-bedroom apartment she has filled with plants and photos of her family.

?It's home,? she says, looking around with pride. ?I have neighbors, and we look out for each other ? I have a friend here who will come with me to get groceries and help me carry them

back. And Marcus is amazing.?

Tonia is looking forward to planting an herb garden in the backyard common area at Veterans Square.

Ferdinand is helping Tonia with paperwork to access transportation to take her to medical appointments, and to a variety of other services that are available through the building. She?s also going to start a Bible study group with J.C., and has a plan for the building?s outdoor common area.

?I?m excited to start my little garden downstairs,? says Tonia, pulling out seed packages. ?I have basil, cilantro, chives, and parsley ? and doing that is going to help me out a lot.?

That belief in a better tomorrow for this new community is what drives Ferdinand every day.

?I hope that this place can become the home that they imagined when they were out on the street,? he says. ?A place where they can be happy, where they can feel fulfilled, and where they can have some agency over what?s happening and really enjoy their lives.?

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