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First North Berkeley affordable housing in over 30 years, Jordan Court, opens

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By SUPRIYA YELIMELI | Berkeleyside | May 5, 2022

This time last year, 71-year-old Brenetta Fisher was living with her daughter in East Oakland and undergoing the last of her radiation treatments for breast cancer.

The South Berkeley native had moved out of the city 15 years ago after her rental home was sold. She used to think to herself "I'm gonna die before I get an apartment."

But in late February, Fisher got a call from the site manager for the new Jordan Court apartments in North Berkeley. She became the first tenant to move into the property on March 1. The affordable housing development hosted its grand opening on Thursday afternoon.

Berkeley Mayor Jesse Arreguín, City Council members Sophie Hahn, Kate Harrison, Rigel Robinson, Health Housing and Community Services Director Lisa Warhuus, leaders with All Souls Episcopal Parish (on whose property the housing is located) and several other local and regional officials attended the event, touting the project as the first to use Measure O funds and the first affordable housing development in North Berkeley in 30 years.

The San Francisco Examiner in 1990 reported on the previous "scattered" North Berkeley public housing, built a few years before.

"Welcome to my first party!" said Fisher, cheerily greeting the group and describing her relief to live out her retirement in a safe and private home.

"The ability to sit and read a book and not worry about losing my life is an honor that I didn't think I'd get in my old age – especially not in North Berkeley," Fisher said.

Satellite Affordable Housing Associates (SAHA) headed the project, which was first discussed in the city about seven years ago. The groundbreaking was held in March 2020, beginning work on the 34-unit affordable senior housing project, with 12 units set aside for formerly homeless residents. The building began moving in tenants in March after fielding about 1,000 applications, according to site manager with SAHA, Sam Fakiri.

Thursday's opening for the \$25 million project was an emotional event, as dozens of local and regional affordable housing developers, financiers and nonprofits came together to celebrate a small win in the housing and homelessness crisis – which has only worsened during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

The Berkeley Housing Authority provided 24 Section 8 vouchers for residents at Jordan Court, available to seniors making between 20% to 60% area median income. The large white-and-grey building has a community room, laundry room, shared outdoor terraces and a large courtyard, where the grand opening event was held and is adjacent to the All Souls Episcopal Parish, which has two three-bedroom apartments for church staff on the property.

"Jordan Court is just one small part of the collective work in our city, the state and beyond [to end the housing crisis]," Rev. Phil Brochard, among multiple Berkeley church leaders leading the push for affordable housing, said at the opening. "We are humbled and proud to be part of the movement to create community and support for those who are vulnerable."

Brochard and Chris Schildt, chair of the Berkeley Housing Authority, spoke to the importance of creating a stable and sustainable place for seniors in Berkeley through projects like Jordan Court, citing the homelessness crisis and figures that show seniors are the fastest-growing homeless population in California.

A UC Berkeley Labor Center study also found that three out of 10 seniors in California do not have enough income to cover their basic needs, with the inequity falling hardest on seniors of color, older women, and those who are unmarried or are renters.

Arreguín said that while the project is the first in North Berkeley in over three decades ? he hopes there will be many more in this neighborhood, and those throughout the city.

In the short-term, the much anticipated 100% affordable housing project at 2012 Berkeley Way is nearing its opening this summer, bringing 53 units of permanent supportive housing and 89 affordable housing units.

?The fact that we can provide homes, and lift people off the streets and out of poverty, provide them a room of their own and a key in their hand, is really an incredible thing,? Arreguín said. ?It?s something to celebrate.?

Elena Vega, 75, also moved into Jordan Court in early March, and was previously living with her daughter in Berkeley, and couch-surfing between relatives? homes throughout the state.

She grew up in Belize, and lived in Miami for 30 years working three jobs as a nurse before she had to return home to take care of aging parents until they passed away. When she returned to the U.S., her worsened health conditions meant she could no longer work as much to afford rent.

The day Vega got her key to the Jordan Court apartment, all she brought with her was a sleeping bag and a coffee cup ? her only possessions that weren?t scattered between several relatives? homes.

?It?s very exhausting,? Vega said of her several moves. ?When you?re my age, you just want a little corner of a room to [yourself].

Now, ?it?s like heaven.? Vega is able to live near her daughter and grandkids, who rent a home in North Berkeley, and cook for them multiple times a week. She?s also met and made friends with people in the community.

For Fisher, who retired from being a professional receptionist in 2014, the home means she has the freedom to live her time as her own. That means spending the whole day walking around Berkeley taking photographs, meeting new friends in the community room.

She?s a bit of a rabble-rouser, and said she?s always alert to any issues that may arise at the housing complex. But it?s a sanctuary for her, Fisher said as she walked around her apartment and then showed off the building?s airy fifth-floor terrace, taking in views of the San Francisco Bay.

Sometimes, people ask her if she has a ?mantra? that keeps her so positive.

?[In the morning] I brush my teeth, I comb my hair and I look in the mirror and I go ?You know, today I really don?t give a f?,? Fisher laughed. ?I woke up ? everything after that is gravy. I got a wonderful place to live and I have kind neighbors.?

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