

Leigh Avenue Senior Apartments Move-in Day

Perseverance

By Geoff Morgan

On June 14th, our first four residents moved into [Leigh Avenue Senior Apartments](#), which will ultimately house 63 senior households who were formally homeless. I had the privilege of handing the keys to the second move-in, Francis. Francis had just come from interim housing in Milpitas. Her new home at Leigh Avenue will end her 20 years of couch surfing and living on the streets.

As a project manager, I was responsible for working with Jeff Oberdorfer, former First Community Housing Executive Director, to acquire Leigh Avenue in partnership with Barry Mirkin and Aaron Bogomilsky, our retail partners, back in July of 2008 and quickly followed by land use approvals in December 2008 – over 12 years from our first resident moving in. The development partners had to place a hold on the project through the economic downturn of 2009, followed by our team's restart and repurpose the site as permanent supportive housing, financing despite an almost tripling of costs since the project was initially proposed, and adapting to the more intense needs of unhoused seniors, the fastest growing of all the homeless populations in Santa Clara County.

Francis was homeless for 7 years when we began developing Leigh Avenue. She was homeless for 18 years by the time we opened Second Street Studios, San Jose's first 100% Permanent Supportive Housing community. Second Street Studios was challenging to build and is challenging to operate. Fortunately, we have a solid partnership with Destination: Home, Santa Clara County and the City of San Jose, who are working with us to add the services and physical improvements we learned we needed at Leigh Avenue.

Leigh Avenue benefited from the difficult learning lessons we have experienced, around security, fire prevention, cleaning and many other opportunities to improve the property. Second Street Studios was the toughest project we have ever developed or operated. And yet, it is the most impactful for our community and the one I am most proud of. We are committed to making improvements as we have done at Second Street throughout all new FCH communities like Leigh. From the transit monitors in the lobby which inform residents and help to ween them off expensive private vehicle transportation, to the community gardens that build healthy people and healthy communities, and the many other services offered, we continue to commit to helping those we serve not only to stay housed but to thrive.

Leigh Avenue has benefited from lessons learned such as implementing more durable designs and added safety features, ways to perform smoother more successful move-ins, enhanced transit and bicycle amenities, and onsite supportive services to help keep people like Francis housed and independent. Every day, our partnerships grow a little stronger, and our residents are better served as we keep learning from them.

I asked Francis, "what is the first thing you plan to do when you move in?" She said she wanted to read her bible. She told me her favorite passage is in Psalms. Francis reminded me – in what mattered most to her at that moment – about what it means to live with faith, hope and love, even in the face of abuse, abandonment and other great trials. I watched as Francis's eyes slowly started to glow brighter as Jackie, Leigh Avenue's Manager, showed her the new unit,

explained its features, and showed her the furnishings and housewares unpacked and set up by volunteers to help Francis feel more at home. Perhaps it was dawning on her that this was real. The supportive services offered by Abode Services based on personalized intake surveys a few minutes earlier and the explanations and support offered by Jackie and all the John Stewart Company staff, will give Francis a real chance to thrive. The process was quiet and smooth, and transformational. We are getting better at this work each time a new resident moves in. And it is getting easier to build and to serve each time.

What do we have in common with Francis? What made this transformative moment possible?

A lot of faith. And perseverance.

Geoff Morgan
President and CEO



Francis and Geoff



Second St Studios meeting with residents