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Safe, Affordable, Accepting - The Definition of 'Home'

By Laurie Snyder



"There's a growing need for more housing because the incidence of autism, for example, is escalating. Most of the severely affected autistics will never be independent," said Orinda resident Glen Petersen as he spoke before the Orinda City Council in July. His son, Aaron, was just two years old when diagnosed with autism. Photo Ohlen Alexander

"The reason I'm here is I'm very passionate about the problem of housing," said Orindan Glen Petersen as he began his allotted public forum minutes at a July Orinda City Council meeting. The council was in the midst of one of many discussions it has held regarding updates Orinda is making to the Housing Element of its General Plan. Petersen's presentation has so resonated with attendees that Lamorinda Weekly is revisiting the reason for his decision to speak in preparation for the City Council's Dec. 9 meeting when it will again discuss the Housing Element.

"There are a lot of parents with disabled kids who know their kids will never be independent. Eighty percent of those will live at home with their parents until they pass," said Petersen, a physician and 24-year Orinda resident with a 26-year-old autistic son. He and his fellow members of Sunflower Hill (www.sunflowerhill.org) have been working to improve the quality of life not just for their own kids, but because there is a growing need for supportive housing with the escalation of autism diagnoses nationwide. "Most of the severely affected autistics will never be independent."

The children involved with Sunflower Hill range in age from 14 to 28. And one thing they all have in common, said Petersen, "is that they will fit the needs of the RHNA [Regional Housing Needs Allocation] requirements for individuals needing very low-income housing."

"Our kids grow up, turn 18, and then we find ourselves asking, 'Is there life after high school? Where will our children go?'" said Susan Houghton, Sunflower's executive director. Her own son receives just \$800 per month in Social Security, which will be cut if he earns any income. Young adults like her son "either have to live with their parents or the state pays for them to live in a group home, which can end up costing the government up to \$40,000 for one person to share one bedroom with another resident."

Plus, there is the humanity factor. "Our kids are in the middle - not high functioning like children with Asperger's, but they don't have behavioral issues. Many also have no physical disabilities so they can contribute to society. They just need supportive housing with a vocational track," says Houghton. "We're trying to work with cities to let them know that this type of housing helps fulfill California's low-income requirement but without negative impacts because our kids don't drive and have either aged out of school or have other education options."

Right now, in Orinda alone, there are 100 individuals with developmental delays who need or will need affordable, supportive, safe housing. And that need is clearly a long-term one for Orinda because 42 percent of that 100 are age 14 and under. Plus, there are 275 others needing help in Lafayette with another 100 in Moraga.

"My wife and I have explored every adult living option possible since our son was 14," wrote Orinda resident Tobin Travarthen, whose son recently aged out of school. "He desperately wants to be like everyone else. He wants to make his own way." They have found ways to get him from a

day program, but "the conflict of letting go and wondering if he will catch the right train or the right bus and get off at the right location gnaws at us. Will he be able to push the button to cross the street of a busy highway while navigating drivers and drivers who are not aware of his situation? The irony is this fear could happen to the parents of any teenager looking down at a phone instead of paying attention. But, for adults with special needs, a large dose of empathy and compassion is also needed to get them to their destination."

These are just a few of the reasons why Sunflower Hill leaders hope to create an intentional community that offers individuals with developmental disabilities "a community within a community" - safe, affordable housing provided in tandem with meaningful work opportunities and the freedom to join in community activities or not - in an atmosphere where the residents will feel supported and valued, and be inspired to develop true friendships.

While each Orindan has his or her own idea of what makes a house a home, common ground in the ongoing housing element debate appears to reside in the words of Maya Angelou: "The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned."

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