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Quechee's Affordable Housing Complex Helps Its Residents Grow

By Matt Hongoltz-Hetling
Valley News Staff Writer

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Quechee — Before Samantha Sharkey moved into Quechee Pines, an affordable housing project managed by the Twin Pines Housing Trust that was reopened last month, life was a lot harder for the 30-year-old single mother of two boys.

In 2004, she graduated high school and, eager to improve herself, took out a loan to enroll at the New England School of Hair Design in West Lebanon.

"I was leaving Rutland at 7:30 a.m. I would get to school for 8:30 a.m. It started at 9 a.m.," she said. "I would get to work at 4 p.m. at Dominos, work until sometimes 1:30 in the morning, drive all the way back to Rutland, sleep for a few hours until 6:30 a.m., and then drive back and do the same thing. Over and over."

By 2012 — after eight years of floating from apartment to apartment and working long hours at a variety of low-paying service-sector jobs, a split from her husband left her homeless.

She already knew how to be thrifty — she was a regular at secondhand stores, but also was on the lookout for deals at department stores, one time netting 19 pieces of clothing for her kids for \$36. Her bra was 6 years old. She refused to be tempted by credit cards, but often had to borrow \$10 for gas money.

But now, she was beyond thrift.

By that time, she had left her most recent job — with a power and telephone supply company in Bethel — because the child care was costing her more than she was earning.

"You can't live by yourself on \$10 an hour," she said. "You just can't do it."

She didn't want to rely on the kindness of friends and family, she said, so she moved into the Upper Valley Haven, a homeless shelter in White River Junction, so that she would have a roof over her head while she tried to work out her next move.

Two months later, she landed a temp job with decent pay at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center, and Haven staff told her about Quechee Pines.

Andrew Winter is the executive director of the Twin Pines Housing Trust, which directly manages about 140 rental units in the area and is just a bit more than halfway through a \$6.1 million effort to increase and improve 35 units in Hartford.

He said the rebounding economy is making it even more difficult for people like Sharkey to find affordable housing in the Upper Valley.

Winter said landlords take advantage of the tightened housing market to increase rent prices, and that low-income residents often have no choice but to pay more than they can realistically afford.

"Rents are outpacing incomes," he said, citing a waitlist of 300 individuals and families seeking affordable housing like that at Quechee Pines.

In Hartford, the housing trust is developing eight buildings on five properties, including the construction of two new buildings on South Main Street in White River Junction, as well as a complete overhaul of the two buildings in Quechee Pines on Hathaway Road.

"We spent approximately \$900,000 to renovate those two buildings," Winter said. "These buildings have been built in the late '70s, and frankly had not had much in the way of significant work done to them since we acquired them in the 1990s."

Moving into her two-bedroom unit in Quechee Pines in 2012 was a big improvement over the Haven, Sharkey said.

At \$800 a month, it was only about half the cost of other rentals she had been able to find in Quechee.

But still, she said, the apartment was "pretty rough." The area beneath the kitchen sink was rotted all the way down to the floor, she said, and half of the electric outlets didn't work. She had a constant battle with mice, and the uneven ground of the dirt parking lot was a constant danger.

Because Quechee Pines shares a zip code with Sharkey's affluent neighbors in the well-to-do Quechee Village, she was able to send her kids to Ottauquechee School. She was happy about that, she said, but it also meant the kids soon noticed the differences between their lifestyle and the lifestyles of their peers.

"Their other friends have four-bedroom houses, you know," she said. "Obviously, they want their own rooms."

In February, during her fourth winter at Quechee Pines, a single misstep on the frozen ground caused Sharkey to break her ankle, costing her roughly \$1,600 in lost wages while she was on disability for two months.

Winter said the renovation, which included new windows, siding, flooring, cabinetry, appliances and paint, allows the units to be safer and more energy-efficient.

The housing trust moved Sharkey out in June to do the work, and the new units were issued certificates of occupancy in September, allowing Sharkey to move back in.

She said both she and her kids were thrilled with the renovation. The parking area, she said, is now safe.

"They regraded everything. They took care of the ruts and everything's smooth, so there's no place for the ice to build up," she said.

And even before the renovation, Sharkey credits the stability of the Quechee Pines housing with allowing her to finally gain traction in her career.

The temp job at the medical center turned into a full-time gig, and she's continued to advance.

Today, she works as a senior clinical secretary at the Norris Cotton Cancer Center, a job that she says has much better benefits, and pays about twice what she made at Dominos.

That has, in turn, allowed her to pursue a home loan through the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development program, for a site she's selected in White River Junction.

"I'm actually in the process of building a house," she said. "I'm just waiting for the final OK."

"It's a great story," Winter said, "and a credit to her for her hard work and tenacity in overcoming the challenges in her life and getting into a position where she's thinking about home ownership."

When Sharkey moves out, it will open her unit for someone else in need, Winter said.

Sharkey said she had advice for those who might feel, as she once did, that years of struggling wouldn't bring the American dream any closer to reality.

"Don't give up," she said. "It gets better."

Matt Hongoltz-Hetling can be reached at mhonghet@vnews.com or 603-727-3211.