

Raleigh program offers companionship and freedom

Like many others, I watched the Building Independence Lake Wheeler project in Raleigh progress from vision to fundraising to muddy construction site to — finally! — three completed homes for nine adults. Since the first tenants moved in last October, I've been eager to see for myself what life is like at the homes.

The result of a partnership between Lutheran Services Carolinas, Habitat for Humanity of Wake County, and the Serving Cup, the homes provide safe, affordable housing for adults with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. But they are so much more than that, I discovered. Building Independence empowers residents and gives them freedom — and also the support of a caring community.

As with LSC's Green Level Apartments in Cary, LSC staff serve as program managers and provide on-call support for tenants, who pay an affordable monthly fee and meet with LSC staff monthly.

Things occasionally get confusing because three of the six male residents are named Chris. Program assistant Cheri Rollison explained how it works. Each Chris has an initial

Above right: Tenants of Building Independence Lake Wheeler in Raleigh, including Chris C. and Chris F., like to help out at the Habitat for Humanity building site down the hill, shown here.

Right: 3. Mollie smiles as she relaxes on her couch. All of the Building Independence residents have private bedrooms.



BUILDING independence





Above: Kyle enjoys hanging out in the common area of one of the homes at Building Independence Lake Wheeler. Right: Chris S. and Building Independence Program Assistant Cheri Rolison pose in front of the Building Independence home Chris lives in.



attached to his name for clarity: Chris S., Chris F. and Chris C.

Chris S., 24, is gregarious and articulate. On the day I visit, he's just started a new job at Walgreens.

"It was amazing," he said. "I was stocking candy."

We check out his room, and he shows me his Special Olympics medals, including several won at the national bowling tournament in El Paso. Chris S. likes to study birds and shipwrecks, and he collects rocks and foreign currency. He works out often and says he's down six of the 20 pounds he wants to lose. I admire his discipline and tell him so.

He's able to regularly see his mother, who lives nearby. He also spends time with his father — sometimes they go fishing together. Still, he enjoys living on his own.

"I like my freedom and independence," he says.

I also meet Kyle, 27, who attends Wake Technical Community College.

"It's a new experience here," says Kyle, who used to live with his mother. "I like getting to know people." He's fond of his housemates and likes having buddies around.

Kyle shows me his room, and right away I notice a bookshelf with an abundance of very well-organized comic books.

"I'm a comic book kind of guy," Kyle says. He doesn't have a favorite, but if he did, he allows that it might be Green

Lantern.

He's also fond of Garfield.

"He is kind of a fat cat but he has good intentions," Kyle observes. I really can't dispute that.

Like the other residents, Kyle is responsible for some household chores.

"Today I have to sweep up the kitchen floor," he says. "Most days I take care of the trash."

Then I meet yet another Chris — Chris F., who is 21 years old and originally from Pennsylvania. He loves being surrounded



Building Independence residents like Sara are responsible for their own laundry.

by friends and sharing meals and chores and good times.

"It wouldn't be fun living by yourself," he says.

He has a smile so bright you wonder if it might be contributing to global warming.

The residents are responsible for their own meals and their own shopping. Some, like Sara, cook using George Foreman grills and woks. Others, like Kyle, lean pretty heavily on the microwave.

The residents like to walk down to the nearby Habitat for Humanity building site and pitch in when they can. I tell Kyle I'd like to see the site, so he and two of the Chrises take me down there. Work is wrapping up for the day, so there are no tasks for the guys to volunteer for this time. After checking the construction progress, we head back.

Later, as I'm leaving to go home after my visit, I pass Chris C. He's wearing outdoorsy clothing, including a camo jacket, and he reminds me of guys I grew up with who like to hunt and get their trucks muddy. I can tell from the bags he's carrying that he's on his way back from the grocery store, which is less than five minutes away by foot.

I wave goodbye, and as I head for my car, it occurs to me that sometimes, freedom is as simple as being able to walk to Food Lion and buy your own potato chips.

— **Katie Scarvey**
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