

Culture

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First Adoptive Community of its Kind in Florida

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New Life Village is a community for people about to adopt, have adopted, or want to serve as surrogate grandparents to children who have been adopted from foster care.

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There was a time when community meant more than cookie-cutter houses with manicured lawns. Children not only responded to parents but their neighbors too. A helpful neighbor was always just a phone call or a few yards away.

Recreating that

sense of community is the goal of one Tampa community for adoptive families.

[New Life Village](http://newlifevillage.org/) (<http://newlifevillage.org/>) is a community for people - whether it's a single parent or an empty-nest couple - looking to adopt foster care children. Even older adults can be a part of the community as surrogate grandparents.

"The idea is that this will be a village like those people grew up in many years ago or people still have in other countries," Executive Director Paul Halpern said. "Where people own the village and know each other and get everything at home."

Halpern said they're looking for more people to join them. He said there are people who have thought of adoption but have been hesitant to take action.

"New Life Village offers that person the missing piece that they were looking for," Halpern said, so hopefully it will push people over to make the decision rather than just thinking about it. "If I move to New Life Village, I have the village there as my partner."

The village is a gated townhouse development on almost 12 acres of land near Palm River in Tampa. Members of the Sisters of Holy Cross purchased the foreclosed development two years ago.

There's a club house, playground and pool. It includes two and three bedroom townhouses. 11 units are occupied and

10 new ones just opened up. Additional units are being remodeled with help from Manhattan Construction, the contractor doing pro bono work. Though it is not an affordable housing community, residents do pay a lower rent rate, \$720 for a two-bedroom and \$810 for a three-bedroom townhouse.

Part of the community includes older adults around the retirement age who decide to move in and be surrogate grandparents. Older adults are required to spend about eight hours a week volunteering.

"The senior surrogate grandparents also provide support and a place to hang out and cookies to bake, and [are] available for the children so that the child can be a winner and the parents can create a winning situation for that child," founder Sister Claire LeBoeuf said.

"They're kind of ready and available to pick up the pieces when parents might have reached the end of their rope or a child just wants someplace else to go or somebody else to talk to," LeBoeuf said, "they're grandma, they're grandpa."

Surrogate grandparents have to go through an application process that includes a background check.

Gloria Rondeau is retired and is a New Life resident.

"Well, I'm at an age where I can't just sit around," Rondeau said, "I like to help and I like to be of service, and I like children."

Rondeau hasn't met all the children yet though she did meet a boy who appeared to be seven years old.

"I met one young boy yesterday who really touched my heart," she said. "He said he wanted to go to Africa to see all the animals and to help them because they don't have a lot over there and it just touched me that this little seven-year-old (was) very well spoken. And I'm anxious to meet a lot of them."

The idea for New Life Village came after LeBoeuf visited the [Generations of Hope](http://generationsofhope.org/) community in Illinois. They too are an inter-generational community catering to the needs of adoptive children. New Life is the first community of its kind in Florida.

LeBoeuf has been working with foster care children for years, and though she's never been without a family or a home herself, she said she can relate to the children she works with. LeBoeuf's mother died when she was 13 years old. LeBoeuf went to live with her godmother for a year.

"My godmother loved me pretty much as my own mother, yet in that home, I was the extra person," LeBoeuf said.

She then moved back with her father after he remarried but things weren't the same.

"I knew where I was going to sleep that night, I knew where my next meal was coming from," she said, "those things were very secure. However, I really felt that I didn't have a deep sense of belonging, this was not my home and so it was a lonely, lonely place."

That's exactly opposite of her vision for New Life Village, where they strive to give adoptive children a community they can be a part of.

LeBoeuf's dream doesn't stop here. The next phases include building large four-to-five-bedroom family homes, one-bedroom apartments for older adults and a center that could be used for education, worship, and the arts.



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