

Full house: Unique South Portland project for disabled adults celebrates sale of final apartment

By [Randy Billings](#)

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A place of his own

Photo: Rich Obrey / For The Forecaster

Ben Schklair, formerly of Cape Elizabeth, is never far from a guitar in his room at the E Street condominium project in South Portland.



Many thanks

Photo: Rich Obrey / For The Forecaster

Cape Elizabeth resident and attorney Paul Bulger thanks the people and organizations that helped make the E Street condominium project a reality. Bulger and his wife, Mary Chris Bulger, led the effort to develop the property so that their daughter, Anna, and other working disabled adults have the opportunity to live in the community.

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SOUTH PORTLAND — A new housing complex in Knightville for disabled adults has defied the recession and the beleaguered real estate market.

Owners of the project in a former Grange hall at 20 E St. say they expect to close next week on the sale of the last of nine rooms for disabled adults.

The complex is designed for people able to live semi-independently, holding down jobs, doing their own grocery shopping and finding their own entertainment in the community.

The building, however, is also staffed 24 hours a day by two employees who live on the top floor. There is also a full-time house manager and clinical director. Together, the staffers provide a range of services, from preparing meals to addressing more medically complex issues.

Each resident has their own room. There are common living, dining and recreation areas.

Modelled after other specialized housing facilities, it is the first of its kind in the state. But it may not be the last.

Cape Elizabeth resident Paul Bulger, the attorney for the project, said he has already been contacted by people in Brunswick and Presque Isle interested in building similar facilities.

Bulger and his wife, Mary Chris, have been the public faces of the project since it was first envisioned two years ago. They were compelled to find stable, long-term housing and care for their 21-year-old daughter, Anna, who is autistic.

The couple quickly set their sights on the Knighville building, which provides residents with easy access to shopping, recreation and public transportation.

Residents purchased their rooms for about \$150,000 each and pay monthly fees of about \$1,700 for operating costs and staff salaries.

While the Bulgers received early financial commitments from a few families, Bulger said it was difficult to pre-sell all nine rooms before beginning construction. The sales were intended to fund the \$1.2 million project cost.

"It was built on faith," Bulger said. "It was a 'build it and they will come.' And they did."

The group also received a \$50,000 loan from the city's Community Development Block Grant program.

Bulger said the state has committed an \$80,000 grant over the next two years to help defray the operating costs for residents, who also receive Supplemental Security Insurance and disability waivers from the government.

While other group homes set rigid schedules for their residents, Bulger said the E Street model gives residents the flexibility to make their own choices.

"It very much about responsibility and community. It's also very much about independence," he said. "(Residents) are blossoming. They're learning new ways to interact with each other and the outside world."

Residents meet on a regular basis to establish house rules, many of which revolve around use of the television, Bulger said. Their parents, meanwhile, meet weekly to discuss management and maintenance issues.

Bulger said he has seen a transformation in his daughter since she moved into the building in May. He said she relishes being able to walk with her friends to Mill Creek Park for Wednesday concerts and even into Portland's Old Port and back.

Bulger said he looks forward to Sunday mornings, when he helps whip up a breakfast of chocolate chip pancakes, waffles, bacon, fruits and juices. It allows him to stay close to his daughter, while also keeping an eye on the facility.

South Portland resident Anne Schink said the project has allowed her 38-year-old daughter, Ellen, to move back to her home town, after living in a similar housing for the last 13 years in Boston.

"We just had a big family weekend last week," Schink said. "And she was able to be a part of it without making a big production. That is the best outcome."

Schink said her daughter enjoys the new arrangement, too.

"She loves it. She really does," she said. "This group is fun and Portland is a very accessible city."

Ray and Claudette Lavalley sold their house in New Hampshire so their two sons, Marc and Michael, ages 42 and 37, could live at 20 E St.

The couple looked into similar housing in Massachusetts, but focused their attention on South Portland when another son, Paul, who lives in Portland, told them about the E Street project.

Ray Lavalley said he doesn't regret the decision. He said he and his wife find comfort knowing their children will have long-term care and housing.

"We decided to go all out to take care of this project and live more simply," said the 74-year-old Lavalley, who now lives in a South Portland apartment. "This is one of the best things we've ever done."

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