

Renovated residence in North County offers independence for men with autism



Rick Graefe / Journal Steve and his mother, Sherry, walk through the recently renovated basement of a house in North St. Louis County. Steve and two other men, who have all been diagnosed with autism, will share the home.

By Scott Bandle

Tuesday, August 3, 2010 3:06 PM CDT

Steve held his mother's hand as they walked through the house in North St. Louis County. He looked at the new flooring, new rugs, and kitchen cabinets but did not say a word unless prompted by her.

However, his mother, Sherry, said a lot. She was pleased this was going to be a new home for Steve, 30, and two other men. All three have been diagnosed with autism.

"We feel good about him moving here," Sherry said. "We're absolutely confident that he'll be all right. I like it because it's just 15 minutes away from our house."

Steve and Sherry's last name and the house's address are not used for the residents' privacy and security.

This was the 50th house purchased and renovated by Rainbow Village. The non-profit group's goal is to provide suitable residential settings for adults with developmental disabilities.

"We make these homes so people can live in them for a long time," said Michael Rae, director of Development and Community Relations for Rainbow Village. "Some of our residents have been in their homes for 25 years. Many will be in them for the rest of their lives."

It is that longevity that provides comfort to the parents. They know their loved ones will have care after they're gone, Rae said.

Rainbow Village had been contacted by TouchPoint Autism Services after the men's present home was no longer suitable for living. Autism is a neurological disorder that affects the development of social interaction and communication skills.

TouchPoint is renting the house from Rainbow Village and will provide qualified staff around-the-clock so the three men can live in the North St. Louis County residence.

"Rainbow Village has a tremendous reputation," TouchPoint Residential Manager Halimah Abdullah said. "We're very happy with this house. They've done a great job with it."

Without the new house, the residents could have been institutionalized. The new residence also provides the three men with consistency, which is important to autistic people. It is located just a couple of blocks away from their former residence. The men know the neighborhood, grocery stores and bus stops. Steve had taken walks past the new house several times, Abdullah said.

The residents' physical safety was a big concern, Rae said. Rainbow Village spent \$135,000 for the house's purchase and renovation. Workers tore out the driveway and patio and rebuilt them. They closed up a fireplace and put new handrails on the stairs.

The team also chopped down three sweet gum trees in the yard. A step on the large, prickly seeds can twist ankles.

Rainbow Village representatives have talked to the neighbors, explaining the situation. The response was positive, Rae said.

The renovated houses have been welcomed by the neighborhoods, he said.

"We fix up the houses," he said. "The grass is always mowed and we take good care of the exterior. We have volunteers who help us."

It is a lot of work, but very satisfying, he said.

"These homes are good for the residents because the options are putting them in institutions," Rae said. "Steve is healthy and he doesn't belong in a nursing home. He belongs out in the community."