

Neighbors find a home at Mt. Carmel

Twelve apartments in renovated school

By Teresa A. Parsons

Thanksgiving is not a traditional Puerto Rican holiday, but this year may mark the beginning of a tradition for the Sanchez family.

Last week, their dream came true when Ray and Mildred Sanchez and their two sons, Edwin, 9, and Ivan, 8, moved into a brand-new two-bedroom apartment in what used to be Our Lady of Mt. Carmel School.

Classrooms and chalkboards and linoleum floors — once the hallmarks of the building's second and third floors — are all gone now. They've been transformed by carpeting, closets and laundry rooms into 12 living units — six two-bedroom, four one-bedroom and two studio apartments.

Below the apartments, on the first floor, is Sister M. Regis Straughn's clothing store, which nearly doubled in size thanks to the renovation. In the basement is St. Martin's Kitchen, a meal and hospitality program established three years ago by the Sisters of St. Joseph.

Throughout last week, the new tenants gradually moved in. They are a mixture of

blacks, Hispanics and whites, families, single adults, elderly and disabled persons.

Applicants for the Mount Carmel apartments in the Monroe County Area, Inc., and by Victor Bartolotta Jr., a parish outreach worker. They checked applicants' references, housekeeping, credit histories and family situations.

To be chosen, applicants had to live in the Mount Carmel/Lewis Street area, also known as lower Marketview Heights. They also had to meet income eligibility guidelines for low-income persons and be homeless according to the state's broad definition, which includes anyone living in substandard or overcrowded conditions.

Because of an acute shortage of decent, low-income housing, there were more than enough qualified applicants. In fact, the parish alone had more than 65 applicants for the 12 apartments, and the Housing Council had a waiting list of its own. Eventually, the council and the parish merged their lists and chose residents on a first-come, first-served basis.

The Sanchez family has waited more than two years for their new home. The project was first announced shortly after they arrived from Puerto Rico three years ago,

and Mildred, 27, was among the first to sign up for what was then only a vision.

"We never knew if we were going to get it or not," Mildred said. "I was bothering Victor (Bartolotta) many times, asking could I see it one more time."

Nevertheless, they pinned all their hopes on Mount Carmel. While they waited, they shared a two-bedroom apartment in an old house on nearby Ontario Street with Mildred's 25-year-old sister, Idalise, and her 5-year-old son, Jose.

Not only was their old apartment crowded, but it was also poorly insulated and drafty. Ivan Sanchez, who is asthmatic, began developing water in his lungs and other complications. "I think that house was causing it," his mother said. "He's doing a little better now."

Even before it was finished, Mildred fell in love with apartment number 27. "I knew I wanted this one right away," she recalled.

Chief among its attractions for her were the apartment's capacious closets and a small dining area set off from the kitchen. From her window, Mildred can look across Mount Carmel's parking lot to the playground where her boys often play.

Ray, on the other hand, likes the new
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Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

Before they moved into new apartments in the Mount Carmel school building, Mildred and Ray Sanchez (rear) and their two sons shared a two-bedroom apartment with Mildred's sister, Idalise (front), and her son Jose, 5.

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SOMEONE WHO HAS NOBODY This Thanksgiving, why not give something of yourself to someone who has nobody? Giving belongs in Thanksgiving.

Attend Mass that morning in your parish church. Take fifteen minutes to pen a note to someone you know to be lonely, perhaps to a distant relative. Visit a neighbor in the hospital, take a moment to look at the sky. Have someone who eats alone join your family for turkey and all the trimmings... share the warmth of your home and your spirit.

Better yet, feed someone who needs food.

Picture the homeless, and hollowed eyes and swollen stomachs of the millions of people in our world who simply have no food. Not one bite of food. This is not a time for feeling guilt about this tragic situation: that's the easy way out. Put that mental picture in perspective and recall that Thanksgiving is the celebration of God's gift to us. We ask only that you share.

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