

Retirement community offers new way of living

By Kathleen Schwar
Staff writer

IRONDEQUOIT — Alfred Biondo has been living at Chapel Oaks retirement community for three months now.

Of all the features there, he likes the freedom most of all.

"The best thing is you can move anytime," the 91-year-old said more than once during an interview in the new home's living room. He explained that he was pleased that the community, affiliated with St. Ann's Home, doesn't require an entry fee, which he'd lose if he moved. All that's required is his monthly rent.

He doesn't have to mow the lawn, fix the roof or even make dinner. And if he or his wife were to become ill, they have "priority access" — though not a guaranteed admission — to the community's health services on-campus at the Heritage and St. Ann's Home.

Other residents said physical security and convenience were favorite aspects of their new home. For instance, the facility provides transportation to churches and doctors' offices.

"We were undecided in the beginning, but my husband and I stopped driving and felt lost without a car. It was time to make a change," said Jennie Biondo, 85, married to Alfred for 17 years. The two are former parishioners, respectively, of St. Cecilia and Christ the King churches.

Chapel Oaks, which describes itself as the only Catholic-sponsored retirement community in Rochester, opened last June and is 68 percent-occupied, with leases for about 80 percent of its 120 apartments, according to staff. There is a waiting list for the smaller apartments.

Eileen Ryan-Maruke, director of marketing and communications for St. Ann's, said, "The retirement community is a booming phenomenon right now. Everybody is a little different."

The minimum age to join Chapel Oaks is 65. However, the average age of people there is 83, Ryan-Maruke said.

"They're young and independent," she observed. "They can go around on their own. It definitely gives you a new perspective of what is old."

"Two things that keep seniors healthy are social interaction and activity ... and a retirement community like Chapel Oaks clearly is a way to provide that opportunity," commented Betty Mullin, president and CEO of St. Ann's Community.

Nick Lipka, 85, moved into Chapel Oaks after living in an apartment complex where he never saw his neighbors, who were not retired.

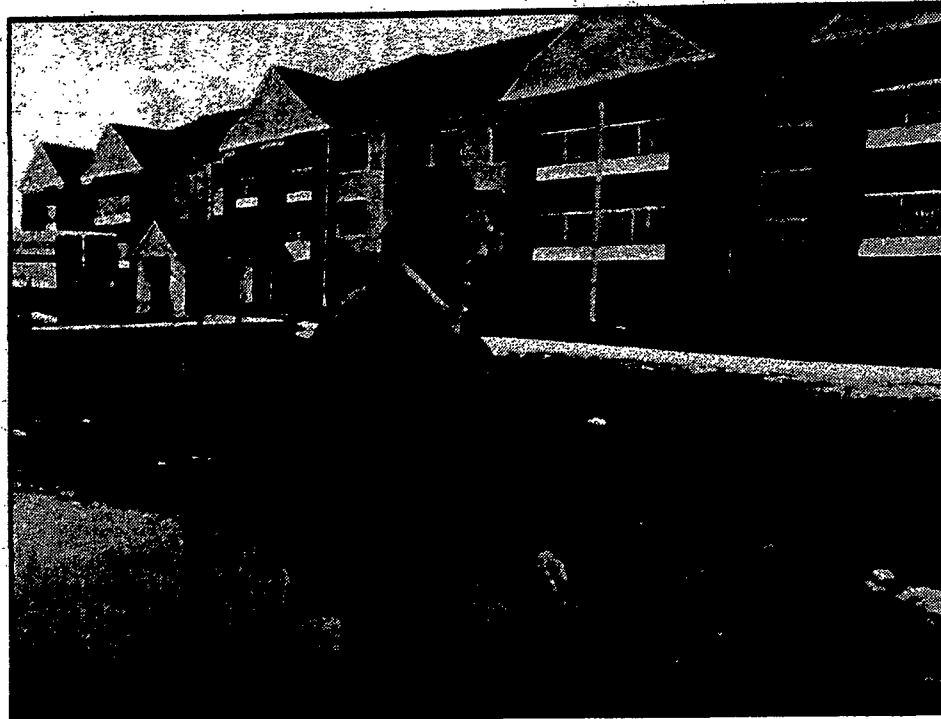
At Chapel Oaks, he said, "You can be walking down the corridor with your head down and someone will walk by the other way and say, 'Good morning, how are you?'"

Lipka, a widower, had sold the home he'd lived in for 47 years and then lived in a Greece apartment for about a year before moving to Chapel Oaks on Dec. 15.

The former Holy Rosary parishioner now attends Mass weekly at St. Ann's Chapel, where ecumenical services also are held twice monthly as well as daily Mass.

A postman and clerk for 36 years, Lipka bikes four miles a day and lifts weights of up to 25 pounds in the center's fitness room.

Meanwhile, his neighbors may be taking advantage of the arts and crafts room, or beauty salon. Or they may be playing



Greg Francis/Staff photographer

Nick Lipka walks outside Chapel Oaks retirement community, part of the St. Ann's Home complex, March 26. He says he doesn't miss the isolation of his former apartment complex.

cards in a bright and airy lounge area. They may be e-mailing someone from the computer in the community's library, reading near the fireplace in the living room, or buying milk down the hall at the convenience store.

Daily activities might include a wine and cheese social, matinee movies, concert, bingo or exercise classes.

Before residents turn in for the night, they must press a button on their phone alerting staff that they're all right.

"If you miss one morning or night, the phone rings," Lipka said.

Someone will call to ask if the resident is all right, and if there's no answer, an employee stops by to look in on them.

Such services are provided regardless of the monthly fee, \$1,295-\$2,890, which is based on the type of apartment. The community has one- and two-bedrooms up to 1,107 square feet, each with a patio. It is suggested a resident have a minimum income of \$26,000.

One lunch or dinner daily may be selected from a restaurant-type menu in a dining room; housekeeping services and flat linen laundry service are provided every two weeks.

This summer the St. Ann's Community plans to begin installing a walking trail of more than a mile with exercise stations around the 32-acre complex. A putting

green already draws golfers.

Enticing as the amenities may be, seniors often find moving from a longtime home to Chapel Oaks — or any other new home — difficult, noted Kathy Langton, senior marketing specialist.

"People will stay where they are," she said. But staff have designed ways to help.

"Robin (Levitt, senior counselor) and I will go to their home, measure their furniture and draw it into a plan," Langton said. They also will provide a directory of movers, packers and decorators.

After residents move in, Langton said, "Their family is invited the first night as their guests for dinner."

One couple, who asked their names not be used, even entertained their parish's council in a private dining room shortly after moving in, in appreciation of the parish's support.

Mike Seelig, director of Chapel Oaks, agrees with Langton that people blossom after moving in.

"It's almost like a rebirth," he said. "You can see physical changes in people, the way they look and smile."

Jennie Biondo said her fears over doing the right thing dissolved as she and Al got to know people and ate with different people at dinnertime.

"It's just like one big family now," she smiled.

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