

Benedictine to add senior housing

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RIDGELY — Sister Jeanette Murray has achieved a lot in her nearly 50 years as executive director of the Benedictine School, but there was one dream that continued to elude her — until now.

This fall, ground will be broken in a housing development near Ridgely for two new homes, specifically for older people with developmental disabilities, the first of its kind in the area.

“It was something I dreamed of for a long time and I never really thought it was going to come true,” Murray said.

Last year, Murray said, she endured two major operations, and, at the age of 85, thought that was the end of her vision. But after she recovered, she had a renewed zeal.

“I think it was the operations that got me started up again,” Murray said. “I was just determined to fulfill that vision.”

That vision will be fulfilled when two 4,000-square foot, four-bedroom group homes, one for men and one for women, are built in the Ashworth West development behind North Caroline High School.

Each home will feature shared sitting areas, a kitchen, communal seating area, living room and work and private space for staff on duty. The homes will also be user-friendly for adults with disabilities, with wider hallways, doorways and alcoves; single-story layouts; smooth, ground-level entrances without stairs; clear lines of sight to reduce dependence on sound; and bright lighting.

The location is ideal because residents will still be able to participate in activities and therapies at the main campus and in the community.

“We want them to be a part of the community,” Murray said.

While Murray said she wanted the homes built “tomorrow,” Scott Evans, open community director, said ground will most likely be broken early this coming fall, and construction will be complete sometime next spring or summer.

“I’m surprised (Murray) didn’t say yesterday,” Evans said with a laugh.

“I like to build,” Murray said.

And build she has. In the 52 years since the Benedictine School was founded — all but three of which Murray has served as executive director — numerous buildings have been built on the main campus outside Ridgely, and, since 1983, several group homes have been built in Delaware and Maryland.



Photo by Abby Andrews

The group homes are for adults 21 years and older who have aged out of the educational program on campus, but can still benefit from the school's assistance. The group home residents maintain the house and work outside the home, either on the main campus in one of its many vocational programs, or in the community.

Some of the first residents of the group homes are reaching their upper 60s.

"Every now and then they want to know when they can retire," Murray said.

Until now, it had not been much of an issue, because developmentally disabled adults generally had a shorter life span. But advances in care have changed that.

"We get a lot of calls from aging parents wondering what's going to happen to their children when we're no longer able to provide for them," Murray said. "The need for a home for the aged with disability was very evident."

Barry Smale, director of the Benedictine Foundation, said it will cost about \$1 million to build both homes. He said about half of that money has already been raised, but now it is time to start appealing to the public for donations.

Murray said she is not worried about the fundraising coming through.

"We never ever had the money to build," Murray said. "Yet we have a wonderful campus here, and very nice group homes."

Murray said everything the Benedictine School has accomplished and all the ways in which it has expanded its care for the developmentally disabled is a testament to ordinary people.

"There are a lot of good people that have made (the Benedictine School) what it is today," Murray said.

Murray said she hopes the two homes being built outside Denton are just the first of many.

The senior care homes are the logical next step, Evans said, for residents who started in the educational program on campus and then moved into a group home.

"It will be a complete and total program for people with disabilities," Murray said. "The senior care home will be a nice place for them to just grow gracefully in their old age."

"It's exciting," Evans added. "Sister has been talking about this project for years."

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