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Christine Wilson graphic

It takes a villager

Hope shines in Friendswood

By **CINDY A. ADAMS**
Weekend Living Correspondent

One visit is all it takes to feel the enthusiasm so abundant at Hope Village. In this corner of Friendswood, nearly 70 residents of this unique, multi-generational home for the mentally challenged readily share the joy they find in each new day, each task and each friendship.

Of little concern to them is the change Hope Village administrators are making on their behalf. In order to continue to meet their long-term needs, and faced with a dwindling endowment after 32 years of operation plus the rising costs of caring for aging residents, Hope Village is entering the world of professional fund-raising, outreach and expanded retail ventures.

"Our founders were private people, who wanted no exposure," said W. Chris Peden, CPA, president of the Hope Foundation board of directors and managing partner of Peden & Associates LLP. "They left a trust when they died, but it wasn't large enough to sustain us through all the ensuing growth and changes."

Hope Village receives no government assistance, and while charitable foundations provide some support, they typically prefer to fund tangible projects such as new buildings, rather than day-to-day operations.

The Foundation's efforts to build revenue and donations also brought many Hope Villagers a new self-assurance.

In the Hope Village Tea Room, for example, four residents wait tables, serve and clear tables for lunchtime visitors. Other residents help shoppers in the Ceramics Shop.

"Residents love interacting with the outside world," said Peden. "Now they get daily doses of it. They are so much more poised and open. It's added a new dimension to their lives, and they take so much pride."

As Peden and Lisa Burke Johnson, the facility's first-ever director of development hired earlier this year, walk through the Village, they exchange first-name greetings with residents returning from a bowling excursion, or on their way between one of five homes and a Work Activity Center.

"Residents feel independent, though in fact most of their activities are controlled to some degree," said Peden.

Claire Hollins, executive director, was attracted to Hope Village 29 years ago because she liked the idea of providing the mentally retarded with individualized, homespun care for a lifetime.

"I just never got around to leaving," said Hollins. "I absolutely love working with the Villagers. I stay for them. It's a very close bond, like family."

Hope Village is home to individuals ranging from mildly to profoundly mentally challenged from ages 12 to 60. Residents younger than 17 reside in one home together; peer companionship and compatibility are foremost in housing decisions for adult residents.

From the beginning — in 1970 when Bill and Lucille Williams opened the first home to provide a nurturing place for their mentally challenged daughter and four other individuals — the commitment was to provide care throughout each resident's lifetime.

"The biggest single concern of parents is 'Who will take care of my child?' We make a promise that that will be us," said Peden, who strives for strict adherence to the founders' principles. New to the board in 2002, he and Hollins know full well the impact of rising costs on many residents' families, most of which are low or middle income. "It's really difficult to watch them grapple with costs going up," said Hollins.



Jim Loyd photos



Villager Mark Beaver paints glaze on a ceramic piece to be sold at Hope Village. The ceramics shop is open Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

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Hope

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The health complications that often accompany mental retardation can be magnified with aging. In an age of rapid-fire medical advances, the life expectancy of this population continues to rise along with everyone else's.

About 10 Villagers now are in their 60s. A new home for them, completed this past fall, includes amenities like a nursing station, a special bathing station and oxygen in two rooms.

"Imagine someone's health beginning to fail, and suddenly they're jerked away from everything they've ever known," said Peden.

Each Hope Village home employs a housemother, who plans and oversees daily life, including transportation to and from school (residents up to age 22 are enrolled in the Clear Creek school district), church, shopping trips and, for a few residents, outside employment or volunteer work. Trained caregivers work in eight-hour shifts at each home around the clock.

Hope's Work Activity Center employs able residents as well as 25 to 30 individuals from the surrounding area to give their caretakers a respite. Roger Proulx, workshop director, employs Villagers from 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. on weekdays. Paid a nominal salary, they beam when they endorse their checks on Fridays and check their account balances. With most residents relying on

Hope Village to underwrite at least half the cost of their care, this is their only source of "mad money."

Like every aspect of Village life, the Work Center relies on volunteers, mostly neighborhood residents and teens from Clear Brook High School, directly across the street from Hope Village, local boy scout troops and church youth groups.

The presence of 60 volunteers both expands residents' experience of the world and helps the Foundation run on a leaner budget than would otherwise be possible.

Some volunteers help man the ceramics studio, which has become the Village's largest source of retail revenue. Since the Tea Room opened in July, ceramics sales have increased exponentially, said Peden. "We've done \$10,000 year to date in sales, versus less than \$2,000 in previous years. We can't make enough of it."

Other work, done via contracts with local firms, includes tasks such as straightening hangers and preparing uniform name tags for recycling, assembling boxes, sorting and stuffing envelopes and counting clips. The work helps with social, motor and fine motor skills, as no doubt do frequent dance and jumping jacks breaks.

What does the future hold for Hope Village, set on a 20-acre lot with room to grow? Surely both tremendous challenge and opportunity.

While Peden and Hollins hope to realize expansion plans one day, they focus now on ensuring day-to-day care. Enter Burke Johnson, who since taking what only jokingly is referred to as her part-time position, has sent out 12,000 fund-raising letters, started a Web site, organized a charity golf tournament and a dinner gala (both catered gratis by Clear Lake's Outback franchise) and produced a video to help publicize Hope Village. Not shy about turning friends and family into volunteering, Burke Johnson said, "Our Villagers have a way of pulling you in."

That trend should snowball in 2003, as Hope Village rolls out a new "Adopt a Villager" campaign, enabling supporters to provide care for specific individuals. For more information about this opportunity to get involved in Hope Village's joyful pursuits, Claire Hollins invites you to call her directly at 281-482-7926.

Visit the Hope Village Tea Room and Ceramics Shop at 15403 Hope Village Road, off of FM 2351 in Friendswood. For information, call 281-482-6271.

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