



Sarah Ettman for the Housing Authority, City of Santa Barbara

Frances Cowling Finds Her "Forever Home" at HACSB's Gardens on Hope

"Pinch me, I have a home at Gardens on Hope!" That was 75 year-old Frances Cowling's first impression the day she moved into her brand new studio apartment. Her voice bubbles with enthusiasm when she talks about the fact



that not too long ago, she used to gaze up at the building during construction, admiring the "beautiful architecture" from afar. She didn't have a clue about the interior design or her chances for securing a unit in the Housing Authority's new complex, but that didn't deter her. Imagine her excitement when she was approved as a resident and handed the keys to her forever home, specifically designed for the needs of low and very-low income vulnerable and homeless seniors.

For many of us, home is a place we take for granted. What makes Frances' story so poignant is that for her, having a permanent place is more than a roof over one's head and having a safe place to sleep at night. Gardens on Hope represents a hard-earned, life-changing transformation, ending her years of homelessness and open doors to opportunities. Frances is candid when she explains that, in her case, she didn't choose to be homeless; it happened as the result of bad choices as well as the high cost of living in Santa Barbara. A former city resident, she says that six years ago she came back and lived in a local motel, while going to her job and searching for affordable housing. "I went to look at apartments that looked nice, but the sad part was the cost was horrible - \$1,500 - 2,000 for a 1-bedroom - and by the time I went to look at them, they were already taken. You get tired of looking and discouraged. I found a little place for



Gardens on Hope, Campus

\$1,400. The amount of money needed to secure a place is difficult, unreasonable. First, last, security deposit and a cleaning fee, all due up front. Landlords don't understand how hard it is to put up that much money at one time. I lived there for a year and a half, but my savings and 401K went down so I had to move out."

Over five years ago Frances applied for and was placed on the HA waiting list. At one point she thought she was in line for a unit at Grace Village, another low-income senior housing property on State near La Cumbre on the site of a former church, but that fell through. Frances had no choice other than to make do by living in her car. She participated in the city's Safe Parking program, parking and sleeping overnight in designated lots. She says that the people running the program are great and other participants watched out for her safety. "I used my YMCA membership for exercising in the early morning and showering to get ready for work. I learned how to make do living in my car, keeping it clean, maintain a decent appearance to look presentable. However, you are there to park when lots open at 6 pm, sleep and leave in morning. I was cautioned to not be too friendly and was harassed by

(Section 8 Housing News, continued)

another person forcing me to move to another lot in the program so I could feel safe again.”



Gardens on Hope, apartment interior

Frances is thrilled with her new studio apartment and the peace of mind it provides. “A safe place is priceless. Before, there was no place to go to except for my car, and you worry about someone breaking a window in the middle of the night. You have to anticipate things to feel safe. I worked in banking and I’ve experienced robberies, so I’m often thinking, I have to always look out for myself. You feel vulnerable. Now I’m on 2nd floor, I love everything about my place. I have an adorable balcony with a table and chairs and a bit of a view of mountains. I finally had to sell my car, after owning it for 17 years - that car was a part of me. But the location is convenient, I can walk to Gelson’s for groceries or use the van transportation service, which also runs scenic trips for residents. It’s so great to come home, shut the door and know I am safe and comfortable. I am home. I have a base now, 80% of my stress is gone, my life is easier. I’m watching my budget, exercising, making plans, even thinking about a new part-time position at Bristol Farms.”

When asked about the staff, Frances is happy to sing the praises of Charlene Fletcher, a 5th generation Santa Barbaran and Executive Director at Gardens on Hope. “Charlene makes herself available for everybody. Some residents are lonely and want to talk. Charlene always has an open door.” Ms. Fletcher says that working at Gardens on Hope is “one of the most challenging and rewarding things I’ve done in my life. To watch these people go from just existing to living is powerful. These are people that have backgrounds that nobody knows, builders, bankers, hotel owners. This generation built this city. To offer peace and security so that they can enjoy their life is price-

less. They don’t have to worry, there is always someone to talk to and things to do and if you don’t want to socialize, you have your space and privacy, the best of both worlds. Residents are my parents age and I know that people can’t afford to live here. I want them to have the opportunity at the end of their life to stay in their life-long community. To keep people here to relive their happy memories from their life is huge. For so many, Gardens on Hope represents their first home. Your heart sinks to your feet and you think, this is why we do this.”

When asked to reflect on the new life she leads at Gardens on Hope, Frances says, “At 75, I’ve done everything I can do, and with what time I have left, I want to be independent, stay healthy, live fully. I’m very grateful, happy, at peace; I’m blessed.”



Gardens on Hope, Courtyard

SBRPA is pleased to present a series of articles by Sarah Ettman for the Housing Authority of the City of Santa Barbara on Section 8 Housing.

Previous articles are available on our website, including information on HACSB’s Section 8 Rent Subsidy Program for Owners & Property Managers: <https://www.sbrpa.org/section-8-rent-subsidy-program-for-owners-and-property-managers>.