

Daily News

dailynews.com

MONDAY, MAY 7, 2007

AFFORDABLE-HOUSING CRISIS TACKLED



David Sprague/Staff Photographer

Stephanie Klasky-Gamer is the new president and CEO of Los Angeles Family Housing, a nonprofit agency charged with finding solutions to the affordable-housing crisis. In the Valley, two-bedroom apartments rent for more than \$1,300 a month.

New nonprofit chief tells her goals

BY SUSAN ABRAM
Staff Writer

CANOGA PARK — Surrounding the tall, slender woman who comes to visit, the children who live at Alabama Court erect a house using building blocks they find in the complex's playground.

The children may not realize it, but building is in Stephanie Klasky-Gamer's blood.

As the newly appointed president and CEO of Los Angeles Family Housing, Klasky-Gamer's goals are to find solutions to the region's affordable-housing crisis and raise the profile of the nonprofit agency.

"I grew up in a house that instilled social justice," said Klasky-Gamer, 38, who was raised in Northridge.

"For me, a tangible way of attacking social justice is through economic justice. And the tangible way of doing that is putting a roof over someone's head."

But Klasky-Gamer doesn't want to simply open more homeless shelters. Instead, she envisions medium-sized apartment complexes sprinkled around Los Angeles, allowing homeless and low-income individuals and families to move out of transitional housing and into stability.

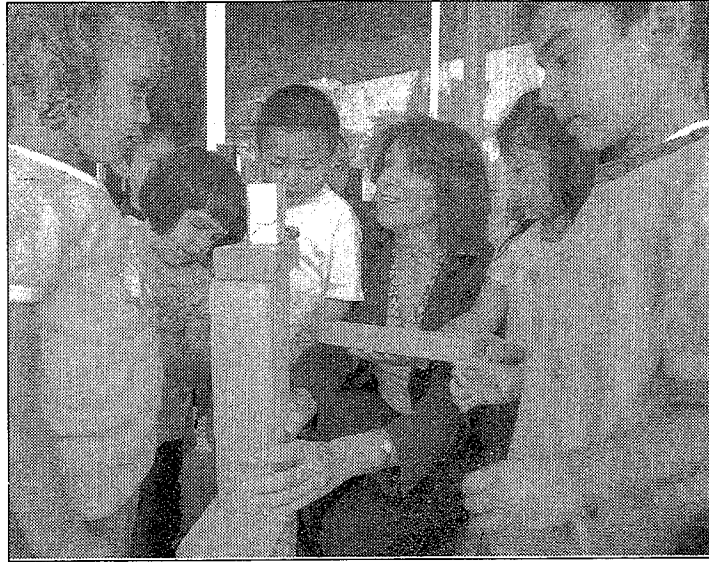
"I'm a strong believer that home ownership isn't for everybody," said Klasky-Gamer, who has worked in the nonprofit sector for 13 years. "We want our clients to become tenants."

But there are obstacles in identifying below-market units in existing buildings and in erecting complexes like Alabama Court in Canoga Park or the 30-unit Cecil Younger Gardens that opened a year ago in Van Nuys.

The inventory of rental units is shrinking in the San Fernando Valley and city-wide as developers take advantage of the real-estate boom and convert apartments to condominiums.

The same boom is driving up the cost of constructing new buildings. Meanwhile, rents for existing units continue to escalate.

A USC study released last month found that a two-bedroom apartment in the San Fernando Valley rents for an average of \$1,385 a month, while vacancy rates are a tight 2.3 percent.



"For me, a tangible way of attacking social justice is through economic justice. And the tangible way of doing that is putting a roof over someone's head," says Stephanie Klasky-Gamer, the newly appointed president and CEO of Los Angeles Family Housing.

"Affordable housing is a huge issue for working poor," said Maryanne Haver Hill, executive director for Meet Each Need with Dignity, the Valley's largest poverty-assistance agency.

Hill said MEND has seen a 300 percent spike in the number of people seeking help over the last three years.

"A lot of times, people don't realize that someone can work a minimum-wage job and not afford housing," she said.

The agency refers many of those clients to Los Angeles Family Housing's transitional facility, where 60 families can live for up to two years. That provides a cushion so tenants can take classes and find jobs to enable them to afford to live on their own.

There is almost always a waiting list.

Los Angeles Family Housing was founded in 1983 when residents from various religious backgrounds came together and bought an old motel in North Hollywood. Since then, the agency has grown to operate 21 facilities in Los Angeles.

Klasky-Gamer's parents were part of the original group that bought the motel, which serves as an emergency shelter.

Buying up old motels remains a strong option for housing for the San Fernando Valley's single men and women, a difficult population to house, she said.

One such L.A. Family Housing-owned property sits on North Hollywood's

Klump Street, an unassuming hotel of 26 single-occupancy rooms.

Resident manager Alex Ponce, a 33-year-old Navy veteran, said he moved into the residence three years ago after seeking help through Los Angeles Family Housing.

He completed a 16-month program through the group's transitional living facility in North Hollywood. Caseworkers taught him life skills including how to save money, fill out job applications and compile a resume.

"I know in many other countries, when you have no place to go, they say go live under the freeway," Ponce said. "But the case workers here keep in touch with me. After you leave the shelter, they help you to be somebody who can be independent, to become a whole person again."

For Klasky-Gamer, meanwhile, another goal is to expand Los Angeles Family Housing's profile, making its resources known to both the business and political sectors.

She also wants to connect with Los Angeles city officials to make sure the San Fernando Valley receives fair consideration of funding and planning for affordable housing.

"There are unique opportunities in the San Fernando Valley," she said, "and I'm a problem solver."

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