

Building Memories: Martin Avenue Apartments

By: Joni Hirsch Blackman for Sun-Times Media
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A new awning was added in recent years to spruce up the entryway of the Martin Avenue Apartments building. | Courtesy Tony Hacker

At the age of 62, Ken Dorsch retired and sent an application to Martin Avenue Apartments.

“I wanted to go south — some of my relatives were in Florida,” he said. “But my wife said, ‘Too many bugs.’ Then I figured my wife’s sister lived here at Martin Avenue, she was content, so I said, ‘Honey let’s go down and make an application.’ ”

They weren’t ready to move to Martin Avenue, though. The couple bought a condo and called over to Martin Avenue every few years, to reiterate their eventual interest. Dorsch, a Naperville resident since 1930, sold the condo four years after his wife died and moved to Martin Avenue Apartments in March 2009. He will celebrate his 99th birthday there in December.

But last weekend, Dorsch and his neighbors commemorated 40 years of Martin Avenue Apartments with a party at Meson Sabika. The complex serves Naperville’s low-income elderly and people with disabilities.

“This was a community effort, and it’s something to be celebrated,” said the Rev. Ken Lehman, a former board member.

Martin Manor, as it was known, was established by a board of 12 people in 1965. Circulating a survey about the need for low-income elderly housing in the area, they received an overwhelmingly positive response.

With the help of the Naperville Council of Churches, federal funding was secured for the nonprofit Naperville Elderly Homes Inc., created Aug. 17, 1967. A \$30,000 community campaign for furnishings, lawn and snow removal equipment, as well as a vehicle for the residents, was helped along by columns written by The Naperville Sun’s Genevieve Towsley.

Ground was broken on Nov. 5, 1971, for the three-story building at 310 W. Martin Ave., Naperville's first retirement community.

"We had virtually nothing here," Lehman said. "It was felt we needed to have a place where retired people with lower incomes could go and live with dignity in a well-run place. For a lot of those people, there was really no place for them to go within Naperville."

On March 1, 1973, the 121-apartment facility opened for seniors older than 62 and earning less than \$6,200 a year. Studio apartments went for \$129 and one-bedrooms for \$149, utilities included. By September, the facility was full.

Bev Frier has been on the board since 1985, joining because "I love the mission, and that amenity is just a star — it's a happy place. I always come out of there feeling good."

The building features a community living room, a dining/kitchen/bingo room, an exercise room, a beauty salon and several lending libraries. The government-subsidized facility is run by a nondenominational board.

"When I go in, the residents give me a hug and say we just love it here," Frier said. "It makes you feel good when you have happy residents. It makes our board meetings very short!"

Shirley Edinger moved from Wauconda to Martin Avenue in 1987 with her husband, Ray, to be near their daughter. The couple volunteered to lock up each night, walking the building hand in hand, checking the doors.

"In the morning, we'd have a game of cleaning up. We'd take a bag and see who could collect the most. When people moved in, he was always there, helping," said Edinger of her late husband, who died three years ago.

"There's always someone to help you here," said the 89-year-old. "I still love it and want to stay a few more years if I can."

She loves the independent living facility's group activities.

"If you can't find something to do here, I don't know what's wrong," she said with a smile.

Complimenting the 16-year building manager, Louise Jacobs, Edinger noted, "She's the best manager we could have — and I know, I've had three of them!"

The complex's location is a plus, Jacobs said, with parks and Edward hospital within easy walking distance for residents, several of whom volunteer there, including Jacobs. For shopping, entertainment and other group trips, a 20-person mini-bus is available.

"You're on your own here. You can be as independent as you want, and do the stuff that's available," said Dorsch, a big fan of the new kitchen cabinets installed thanks to a city grant.

When asked if there were anything else that would make Martin Avenue even better, Edinger replied: "Not a thing, we couldn't be happier."

Dorsch respectfully disagreed.

"I'd like a garage for my car," said the almost 99-year-old. "Oh, take that off ... pretty soon I'm going to start taking the bus."

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