National CORE opens San Emi special-needs development in Montclair

Two months ago, Shaneika Johnson was homeless, spending some nights in a shelter and others on the streets. She stopped by the office of an apartment complex under construction to see if she could somehow qualify to live there.

It was a life-changing moment.

“I never would have thought there were people out there that could help me get out of the situation I was in,” said Johnson, now a resident at the new San Emi special needs apartments in Montclair.

With a new home and support services, she is hoping to go back and finish school so that she can help others the way she has been helped.

“It’s not easy, but I just want to make a difference in the world,” she said. “I know that I’ve got a great team behind me and there’s got to be something in me that can help.”

San Emi is the latest addition to Montclair’s San Antonio Gateway Plan — a campus of four residential communities that have transformed a neighborhood while serving more than 600 adult, family and senior residents. The four communities were developed by Rancho Cucamonga-based National Community Renaissance, one of the nation’s largest nonprofit developers of affordable housing.

San Emi is a state-of-the-art, 18-unit apartment community designed and built specifically for adults with developmental disabilities. It was developed in partnership with the city of Montclair and United

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Cerebral Palsy of Los Angeles, Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties.

“San Emi addresses a critical need in the Inland Empire and beyond, and we thank our partners at the city of Montclair and United Cerebral Palsy for helping us make this transformational development available to this underserved segment of our community,” said Steve PonTell, president and chief executive officer of Rancho Cucamonga-based National CORE.

“CORE’s mission is to transform lives and communities, and San Emi is an ideal example of this.”

Ronald S. Cohen, president and chief executive officer of UC-PLA, said the need for affordable, supportive housing to persons with disabilities has never been greater. At the same time, federal funding is drying up, which could make San Emi one of the last projects of its kind in California.

“I have parents coming to me daily wondering where their child is going to live when they’re adults,” Cohen said.

“Affordable housing is an issue for every community. But it’s an even bigger issue for people with developmental disabilities.”

Montclair City Manager Ed Starr said the city is elated to see the San Antonio Gateway Plan come to completion and “particularly pleased that San Emi embraces an underserved population.” He cited California’s elimination of redevelopment agencies as a hindrance to doing similar projects in the future. Originally, the Gateway Plan was to include a fifth housing community.

“We consider San Emi to be our miracle housing project, not only because of the population base served, but because it survived the machinations of state leaders to eliminate redevelopment agencies,” Starr said.

San Bernardino County Supervisor Gary Ovitt, whose Fourth District includes Montclair, called the San Emi Apartments an important step forward for the region.

“The ability to provide this kind of supportive service — despite the very real funding challenges involved in doing this — speaks volumes about the development team and partners who made it happen,” Ovitt said. “San Emi is a tremendous asset to our community.”

The development features a community center with computer lab, laundry facilities and an outdoor community lounge. All units are designed to accommodate wheelchair users. In addition, the state-of-the-art facility features energy-efficient windows and water-efficient landscaping and fixtures.

In addition to the city of Montclair and UC-PLA, partners include the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the California Tax Credit Allocation Committee, Raymond James Tax Credit Funds Inc., Wells Fargo Bank, Federal Home Loan Bank of San Francisco, Onyx Architects, Ellis Construction Co., Greenfield Construction and Nancy Lewis Associates Inc.