

Nena's Story at Aspen Grove

“I swore I would never set foot on that property again.”

Nena Wheatcroft swore that she would never set foot on the property again when she moved out of the San Franciscan Apartments in November of 2006. She had been living in the complex for five years, and had recently been moved to a different unit within the building. The refrigerator in her new unit wasn't working properly, there were missing countertops, and the baseboard heaters were not even connected to the wall, and didn't work. She made calls for service on three separate occasions, but no one ever came to make any repairs. Finally, Nena, who suffers from multiple sclerosis, was admitted to the hospital for pneumonia in mid-November. Her father decided at that point that she had struggled long enough, and came and moved her things out while she was still in the hospital.

Maintenance issues were the least of her concerns though. According to Nena, there were rampant drug sales on the property. She reported that property management was so lax that people were actually weighing out drugs in the parking lot. “It got pretty bad living there. It was to the point where I just wasn't feeling safe. The shootings and stabbings... I knew cops on a first name basis,” she remembers.

Why did she stay for five years of stabbings, drug dealing, gang violence, and dilapidation? “It was cheap, and I could afford it,” frankly states Wheatcroft.

Her mood didn't turn sentimental after she left. “I swore I would never set foot on that property again.”

But then in 2011 a friend suggested that she go back and take a look. Community Frameworks had recently purchased the property, and had made major renovations to all of the apartments and the buildings. CF had replaced the old property manager with a new company, McVicars & Associates, who began to institute more stringent tenant screening practices and meticulous upkeep of the grounds. In order to reflect the improvements, the complex was also given a new name: Aspen Grove. Nena decided to go back and see for herself whether the complex was really any better.

“I walked in and said ‘this is not the same apartment! These are beautiful!’ Sean (the Resident Manager) is awesome, and when I went in he made me feel like I was welcome.”

“We're not just a property, we're a community.”

Sean Ellis had just moved to the area from Alaska when he applied for the Resident Manager position at Aspen Grove. At the time, he was just looking for a place to live and a decent paying job. He was nervous coming onto the property at first. “I was viewed as

the bad guy. They had a slumlord running their place for so long that they didn't know what the right thing to do was." He had heard stories of previous managers breaking up fights with a baseball bat. When he first arrived, his apartment had not been renovated yet, and he had an ant problem. The apartment below his had fleas.

Sean said that at first it was difficult to find qualified applicants who were willing to live there. But word quickly spread about the changes and renovations that were taking place, and people like Nena began to come back.

"This is where we live."

Both Nena and Sean have felt that the real difference has come about because of the community that the residents have created for themselves since Community Frameworks bought and renovated the complex. Residents have come together to start a block watch program. "I'm liking the block watch," reports Nena. "It's nice to feel like you're involved with something. This is where we live. It gives me something to do and makes me feel like I'm part of something." Residents are also starting a monthly potluck/BBQ, as well as volunteer clean-up days. Sean is putting together a newsletter to tell residents about all of the upcoming events.

"For me this isn't just a job or a home, it's a community," says Sean. "The only way to build a community is for the community to do it themselves. They get to know their neighbors, which is huge."

Nena's life has definitely changed since moving back to Aspen Grove. "I'm a lot happier. I feel safer living here than any where else. There's nice neighbors, and I look forward to coming home."

Sean has felt the same. "When my boss asked me whether I like my job, I said no... I don't like my job, I love my job. I love it here."