

# St. John Village residents share peace and harmony

By Mary Fox

News-Dispatch correspondent

The vision is becoming a reality for the Rev. Dennis Blaney and the people he serves.

For years he has dreamed of a community of group homes in the country where the mentally retarded could live.

There, mentally handicapped people could be with their peers and learn life skills.

Now it has happened: On 184 acres of land near Rolling Prairie are the three homes that comprise St. John Village. In each home live two mentally handicapped people and a steward, or supervisor.

St. John Village is only a start. It is part of the development of Sharing Meadows. Four more villages, each with three homes, are planned for the property. In the plans, too, are a recreation center, a greenhouse, a lodge, chapel, four cabins and a caretaker's house.

Blaney, pastor of Sacred Heart Church, has worked with the handicapped and their parents most of his 37 years in the priesthood. As a young priest, parents of the handicapped told him how the church had neglected them.

"They said repeatedly, 'The church is not supporting us. There's no emotional support. There's not any support.'"

Blaney saw that there was little religious education for the children and no respite care for parents who devoted their lives to their children.

He began religious education programs to meet the youngsters' needs. For the parents, ways to provide services were explored. Respite

Care Services for the Handicapped was incorporated in 1980. That agency has become known as Respite Care of Lake County and operates on its own now.

SHARE Foundation with the Handicapped, where Blaney is president, was founded in 1982. It is SHARE Foundation and its supporters that have made Sharing Meadows possible.

SHARE has conducted a summer camp for the handicapped since the 1980s. It was during these summer camps that Blaney realized the effect of a rural atmosphere.

"I saw that there was a great deal of peace in the people who came. Their eyes glistened when they were walking in the shade of the woods and listening to the water."

And so the idea of a place in the country developed.

On the property in the country, members of St. John Village are helping paint the basement of a home, put up paneling and install a drop ceiling.

During warmer weather, they will plant flowers and trees and tend gardens. Volunteers already planted 450 tulip bulbs, which Blaney hopes will have commercial value.

In their homes, the residents are learning about living together and making daily decisions. They help plan menus and will assist in making meals.

The group homes are not to take care of the residents, Blaney advises. Rather, they are to help people reach their potential.

"How can Johnny grow? Can he grow at home or can he grow living

with his own peers?"

Blaney does not refer to the Sharing Meadows' residents as "disabled." He calls them "other-abled."

"Sometimes when you say 'disabled,' it's a kind of negative connotation," he said. "In fact, the words themselves are negative."

"These people do have abilities. But they're not in the work area as we normally think of work," Blaney said.

"Some of them have very good skills at affirming people. Some of them have skills at speaking the truth," he said.

Blaney would like some of the skills of the other-abled to be put to use at a planned lodge. There, companies could have conferences. Sharing Meadows' residents could give tours of the property.

And the residents could share their tranquility, Blaney said.

"We are developing a place of peace and harmony among nature and persons," he said. "People will be invited to come. In that coming, we will share that peace and harmony. People will go away with more of an inner peace."

It is planned that Sharing Meadows will grow gradually. The residents of St. John moved in in November. The schedule is that every two years another village will be formed, until there are five villages.

Blaney is hoping that funds for the recreation center will be raised soon, so it can be built this year.

All of SHARE's funds come from donations. Some of the money is raised at events such as the dinner-dance scheduled for March 25 in Munster. But most are donated throughout the year.



Photo: Bill Swedenberg

The Rev. Dennis Blaney (right) works with resident Gary Barnes on a painting project in one of the group homes at St. John Village.

"People have been very generous. I'm sure that God has been part of it — a very big part," Blaney said.

Volunteers have been generous with time also. They have planted trees and worked around the homes.

Blaney would like more volunteers to stay overnight when the stewards have days off, to help with the flowers in the spring and to supervise work.

He trusts that all will work out. Looking around the home at St. John Village, he sees all that has been given.

"God has been pretty good to us, really."