

## Life Learning: Framingham school pairs housing, education programs

By Dan McDonald/Daily News staff

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FRAMINGHAM — Pauline Fillman is grateful because she's a success.

Leaving a bad marriage behind while continuing to balance work, school and raising her family, Fillman came to Bethany Hill School, just after it opened more than 14 years ago, with plans for a better life.

Since that move Fillman has earned an associate's degree and a bachelor's degree in social work. Her son, Nicholas, 19, after a childhood of attending private Catholic schools through scholarships provided through Bethany Hill, is a student at Regis College, where he studies communications.

He hopes to one day work in broadcasting.

This summer, the school, a former novitiate which sits atop a swath of pastoral green near the Ashland town line, celebrates 15 years of tethering affordable housing to educational and life skills programs.

Opportunity through education is the Bethany Hill philosophy, says Sister Denise Kelly, the organization's program director.

And the opportunities are wide and varied. Programs include financial planning, job prep workshops, parenting skills, youth summer camps, 12-step recovery groups, language literacy classes, computer training and GED classes.

"Education is a way to move out of poverty," said Kelly.

The idea is better education leads to better jobs, better pay and better lives, Kelly said.

Between 90 and 100 people live in 42 apartments on the grounds.

Every resident is expected to enroll in some sort of educational program.

Fillman says she will not move out of her 89 Bethany Road apartment until she can purchase her own home.

"Kids are sheltered here...it's a safe environment," said Fillman, a mother of three who manages a group home in Framingham.

Since 1994, Bethany Hill has acted as a safe haven for recovering drug addicts, the homeless, the physically disabled, and sexual abuse victims, among others.

Take Walter Bachelder, 51, a reformed heroin addict who is enrolled in Bethany Hill's New Beginnings a permanent congregate housing program for homeless living with HIV or AIDS.

The Cambridge native dropped out of high school in the mid-1970s and struggled with drug addiction for the next two-plus decades, contracting HIV in 1989 through intravenous drug use.

He bounced around, at first from job-to-job, and eventually from detox-to-detox.

He drove a taxi cab, waited tables, and tended bar, all the while battling his addiction, until he ended up "basically homeless."

He came to Bethany Hill in 2002.

Now, the father-of-two has his GED and is attending classes at Mass. Bay Community College, where last semester he had a 3.6 GPA.

He's sober and works as a personal care assistant for a handicapped man.

"Neighbors know each other here," he said. "I think there's a real sense of community. Nobody's drunk and doped out. You don't even hear the language you hear in the streets."

Built in 1927, the Bethany Hill School was at first just that a school for the Sisters of Saint Joseph.

While the building still stands, it is no longer run by nuns. It ceased to be a novitiate in 1964.

From 1971 to 1985 the grounds were used for a different type of education. It was a school for children with multiple disabilities.

Now, weather permitting, the staff would like to throw a cookout to commemorate 15 years of the facility's most recent educational reincarnation this week.

Its operations are funded by the rent from the 42 apartments, some of which are Section 8 public housing.

All residents are assisted with housing costs in one way or another, according to a Bethany Hill pamphlet .

The education programs are funded through grants.

"Education is the key," Kelly said. "It empowers them."

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