

## Group home breaks ground: L'Arche-style care means 'respect of life'



JULY 17, 2012 12:00 AM • BY PATRICK B. ANDERSON / [PANDERSON@LACROSSETRIBUNE.COM](mailto:PANDERSON@LACROSSETRIBUNE.COM)

Members of the La Crosse community broke ground Monday on a 25-year-old dream.

A new home for disabled people at 1810 Green Bay St. will eventually be the city's first residence to adopt the tenets of L'Arche-style caretaking, focusing on a familial, faith-based relationship between disabled and nondisabled people.

The dream belongs to Sue Gilbert, who tirelessly pursued a home based on L'Arche's Christian philosophies for her daughter and other disabled La Crosse residents.

"Pinch me," Gilbert said.

Gilbert is board president of Bridges of Belonging, a local non-profit that owns The Dwelling Place and is funding its construction.

The \$350,000 single-story home will house up to four people with special needs, staffed 24 hours a day, with a wheelchair lift and handicap-accessible bathrooms.

But the L'Arche residence's religious values separate it from other group homes, supporters say.

"It has more to do with the celebration of life," she said. "The respect of life"

L'Arche was created in 1964 by Catholic philosopher Jean Vanier and operates today as an international organization. At the center of L'Arche housing is the relationship between caretakers and the cared-for, but the work done by home staffers is also "grace dependent," said Tom Thibodeau, a member of the Bridges of Belonging. He also directs a program at Viterbo University that awards master's degrees in servant leadership.

Catholic Charities in La Crosse will manage the home, and staff will be trained to treat all of the house's inhabitants with respect, said Deacon Richard Sage, Catholic Charities's executive director.

“We very much stress the individual dignity of each person,” he said. “We will put that into the staff.”

In typical L’Arche homes, disabled and non-disabled people live together under the same roof. That won’t be the case in the La Crosse home, but organizers and staff still intend to foster the same sense of friendship and community.

Golden shovels turned earth Monday on a shady plot on the South Side. Supporters offered kind words, prayer and even a song.

Gilbert shook hands in the milieu, greeting a few of the event’s more than 80 attendees.

Gilbert’s lengthy pursuit of a L’Arche home for La Crosse is rooted in her love for her daughter, who is disabled. She learned about L’Arche from Thibodeau in the mid-1980s.

“Sue Gilbert was the only person who would listen to me,” Thibodeau said.

After Gilbert’s first attempt to bring a home to the city failed, she went back to college at Viterbo and earned a master’s degree in servant leadership.

She formed Bridges of Belonging in 2005 after meeting other community members and religious leaders who shared her passion.

Their support — and the support of the community — finally made the home a reality, Gilbert said.

“You can’t have someone with a dream, you need a community to support your home,” she said. “That’s exactly what we have. That’s why it’s taken so long.”

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