

Sarasota's Lofts on Lemon affordable workforce housing opens its doors to residents

Saundra Amrhein Sarasota Herald-Tribune

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Katie Dore spent the summer on pins and needles.

Like hundreds of Sarasota County residents, the 31-year-old preschool teacher had put her name in the hat for a unit at Lofts on Lemon in downtown Sarasota, a long-awaited workforce housing development.

For over a year Dore commuted more than 100 miles a day from her mother's home in Ellenton, where the family had moved to escape soaring rents, to work, her daughters' school and back.

Now for some residents struggling to find affordable rentals amid the housing crisis, the anxious wait is over. Dore and dozens of other applicants received word regarding a spot in the 128-unit, five-story multifamily complex in the heart of downtown – with 76 general affordable workforce units and 52 specifically reserved for teachers, firefighters, law enforcement and nurses.



Katie Dore with her daughters, Elaya, 4, McKayla, 8, and Ta'Nyia, 10 at their new apartment in Lofts on Lemon in downtown Sarasota. THOMAS BENDER/HERALD-TRIBUNE

Dore learned at the end of August that she had been approved for a two-bedroom, two-bathroom apartment at Lofts on Lemon for \$1,100 a month.

In early October Dore and the girls started to move in, along with about three dozen other households so far.

"I do love it! I get my own kitchen," Dore said as the girls buzzed happily around her, photos she intends to frame spread out across the expansive quartz countertops. "I'm very excited to be with the girls on my own."

Officials seemed just as excited to have residents step into the building's brightly lit and colorful hotel-like lobby.

"It's really gratifying to finally see this come to fruition and actually have people moving in," said William Russell, CEO of the Sarasota Housing Authority.

The public-private partnership behind the effort to build affordable workforce housing with specific provisions for "hometown heroes is unique in the industry, Russell said

The housing authority's \$33 million Lofts on Lemon development project was made possible through a broad public-private collaboration – including grants from the City of Sarasota and the Charles & Margery Barancik Foundation; a low-interest loan from the Community Foundation of Sarasota County; and financing through state tax credits as well as Bank of America and the Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corp.

"To me, that was really tremendous to see the community step up and say, not only are we supporting this, but we're going to invest in it," he said.

Affordable housing demand outstrips supply in Sarasota County

Sarasota's meteoric growth in the price of housing over the past three years – some of the highest in the nation – and a scarcity of affordable workforce housing, especially in downtown Sarasota, has created high demand for a spot in Lofts on Lemon.

Since May, more than 1,000 people have requested applications, said Joe Chambers, managing partner with Fortis Development, which is working with the Sarasota Housing Authority on the project.

Interested applicants included everyone from New College professors to public school teachers, city workers to nurses, grocery store cashiers to employees of the Sarasota County Sheriff's Office.

Officials are expecting to have more than 70 units occupied by the end of October with more residents moving in through November. The official grand opening, delayed because of Hurricane Ian, will be held Nov. 2.

'I'm so happy to be back'

With National Green Building certification, Lofts on Lemon and its amenities include concrete construction and impact glass; balconies and in-unit washers and dryers; fiber optic cable throughout; and a fully equipped fitness room.

The fifth floor has a media room for movies and games, including a foosball table. A community room – with balconies overlooking the city and a view toward Sarasota Bay – holds a full kitchen for events, meals or birthday parties. Outside, nearly an acre of outdoor green space will eventually have a playground.

For Dore, moving out of her mother's house came with adjustments. She and her daughters were sad to part with her mother and brothers. And while the girls had spent weeks excitedly planning how to decorate their own room, they spent the first night or two at the apartment with Dore in hers.

But they slowly got their bearings. For one, no longer facing a commute, Dore can now sleep well past 4 a.m.

Most importantly, the proximity to the girls' school at Alta Vista Elementary and other city programs for kids means greater access to extra-curricular opportunities for 10-year-old Ta'Nyia, who is in ballet classes; 8-year-old McKayla, who loves soccer; and 4-year-old Elaya, who is interested in gymnastics.

"There's so much to do down here," Dore said of Sarasota as the girls nudged her to explore the media and community rooms on the fifth floor. "I'm so happy to be back."

'I just didn't know what to do'

Fellow resident 57-year-old Candy Cunningham felt the same way.

For almost a dozen years, the former real estate agent had rented a unit near downtown before it was torn down 18 months ago to make way for luxury apartments, she said.

Unable to find a place she could afford near her former home, she has been "homeless" she said, living with her daughter and other relatives between taking care of her mother in California, with her stuff in storage.



"This is just a gift from God," Candy Cunningham said standing in her spacious Lofts on Lemon apartment, with the balcony doors wide open and admitting a breeze. *THOMAS BENDER/HERALD-TRIBUNE*

“I just didn’t know what to do,” Cunningham said. This spring, she and her fiancé, Jon Nicholas, 38, a security guard who works in downtown Sarasota, applied for a one-bedroom unit at Lofts on Lemon. She prayed on it, feeling she already had her answer.

When she got it, she was ecstatic. She and Nicholas were approved for the apartment, which would cost them \$950 a month.

“This is just a gift from God,” Cunningham said standing in the spacious apartment, the balcony doors wide open and admitting a breeze as Nicholas moved boxes and luggage in with the help of Cunningham’s 13-year-old grandson, Ricardo Martinez.

Cunningham is thrilled to be within walking distance of grocery stores and other sites near downtown. A granddaughter who attends the Sarasota School of Arts & Sciences can visit between classes.

“It’s just a wonderful feeling,” she said.

This story comes from a partnership between the Sarasota Herald-Tribune and the Community Foundation of Sarasota County. Sandra Amrhein covers the Season of Sharing campaign, along with issues surrounding housing, utilities, child care and transportation in the area. She can be reached at samrhein@gannett.com.



The fifth floor has a big community room. Lofts on Lemon is located at 750 Cohen Way in Sarasota. PHOTOS BY THOMAS BENDER/HERALD-TRIBUNE



The fifth floor also has a media room for movies and games, including a foosball table. PHOTOS BY THOMAS BENDER/HERALD-TRIBUNE



The fifth floor community room has balconies overlooking nearly an acre of outdoor green space will eventually have a playground. PHOTOS BY THOMAS BENDER/HERALD-TRIBUNE



The fifth floor has balconies overlooking the city and water. PHOTOS BY THOMAS BENDER/HERALD-TRIBUNE



Lofts on Lemon is located at 750 Cohen Way in Sarasota. PHOTOS BY THOMAS BENDER/HERALD-TRIBUNE