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by: Pam Eubanks | Managing Editor

EAST COUNTY — The groundskeeper for Community Haven for Adults and Children with Disabilities no longer will venture far when he heads to work each morning. Instead, Michael Niesen, 57, simply will get ready and step outside.

Niesen officially moved in to Community Haven's newest group home Wednesday, June 19, following a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the facility. The new home will house nine disabled adults, including Niesen, and one house parent. Niesen's parents, Jim and Jacquelyn, funded the new group home on Community Haven's property off DeSoto Road, in the East County.

"We didn't know where (Michael) would end up (after we no longer could care for him)," said Jim Niesen, 83. "We were looking for a place for a long time. My wife said, 'God gave him to us; God will take care of him. We found this (place, Community Haven). This is it.'"

Jacquelyn Niesen, who died of cancer in August, met a woman who worked at Community Haven while shopping at a department store about six years ago. After the meeting, the Niesens enrolled their son in Community Haven's Haven Industries program, which matches people with mental, sensory and other disabilities with the opportunity to learn a hands-on skill. As the Niesens pondered their son's future, they came up with a new plan — to build him a home in which he and other disabled adults could live.

The Niesens agreed to fund the construction of a new group home — CHAC's fourth co-ed residential facility for disabled adults. Jacquelyn Niesen, 77, died Aug. 8 — just seven days after she and her husband had finalized details for the new home. Construction began in October.

"This is as close as you can get to a home atmosphere," Jim Niesen said of the decision. "This is a wonderful place. It is the answer to our prayer."

Community Haven President and CEO Marla Doss said Jacquelyn's House residents helped pick out furniture, decorations and other details inside the roughly 4,000-square-foot home. Residents will be able to help with laundry, cooking, cleaning and other day-to-day activities of the house, as well.

"They can be as independent as possible, or some need more one-on-one care," Doss said. "There are opportunities virtually every day of the week for clients to be involved in the community, if they want. It's like real life; we all have choices."

Community Haven already has 14 individuals on a waiting list for its group-home program. Doss said she and the organization's board of directors are undertaking a long- and short-term strategic plan for the campus, which could include the construction of more group homes.

Community Haven has waiting lists currently for both its residential and Haven Industries programs, she said. The organization also is preparing to open its newly remodeled Selby Preschool building, later this summer.

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Jacquelyn's Poem

*Yesterday there came to live,
A special child God chose to give.
I pity one so very small,
Should have a burden after all.
With loving heart and trusting hand,
To grow up in an unknown land.
His step is slow, his progress too,
He's one alone, a chosen few.
What will he learn, how will he know,
Why birds sing songs, or rivers flow?
But watch his face where love doth dwell,
He knows not war or pains of hell.
— Jacquelyn Niesen*