

From its inception, Wilsonville complex for people with mental illness unlike any other in country

by Dana Tims, The Oregonian
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STEPHANIE YAO LONG/The Oregonian For the first time in decades, Gwen Watson is living alone in an apartment of her own. The 51-year-old, who has long suffered from mental illness, is happy and content at the new Rain Garden Apartments for adults with signs of mental illness at Villebois in Wilsonville. Every night before bed and every morning upon waking, she grabs her guitar and sings anything from gospel songs to Beatles hits.

WILSONVILLE -- Gwen Watson picked up her acoustic guitar, gently placed her fingers along the frets and softly launched into John Denver's "My Sweet Lady."

Her silky soprano soared effortlessly into the song's upper register as she plucked the steel strings in mistake-free accompaniment. For all her musical virtuosity, 51-year-old Watson is the first to say her life hasn't always been this in tune.

"Starting at age 17 and lasting for the next 21 years, I was so medicated that I was living in unreality," she said. "The drugs they gave me were the drugs they give murderers."

After decades of living in adult group homes and struggling with mental illness, Watson finally has a place of her own at Rain Garden Apartments, a 29-unit housing complex for adults with mental illness that officially opens this morning.

It's a place unlike any other in the country. Rain Garden, along with two group homes and two apartment complexes for adults with mental illness, is situated squarely among the 700 upscale houses and condos at Wilsonville's [Villebois](#) "urban village." Developers, along with state and county mental health experts, say this is the first place in the United States where mental-health housing was part of a larger master-planned community from its inception.

"We had to go back to Washington, D.C., to ask for federal guidance on how we do this," said Ruby Kadlub, founder of Costa Pacific, which developed Villebois. "They said they couldn't tell me, because it hadn't ever been done before."

The land's history has everything to do with why new residents such as Watson finally have a place to call home. From 1961 until 1995, Dammasch State Hospital was located here. Hailed at its opening as a national model for progressive treatment regimens, the hospital eventually succumbed to the move to deinstitutionalize the mentally ill.

Legislators, recognizing that Dammasch had been dedicated to mental-health uses, passed a bill stipulating that money from its sale to private developers be set aside for grants to groups wanting to build housing there for people with mental illness.

IF YOU GO

- **What:** Dedication of Rain Garden Apartments, a 29-unit housing complex for adults exhibiting signs of mental illness
- **When:** 10:30 a.m. Friday
- **Where:** [29197 S.W. Orleans Loop, Wilsonville](#)
- **Speakers:** Dennis Keenan, executive director, Catholic Charities of Oregon; Richard Harris, interim assistant director, Addictions and Mental Health, Oregon Department of Human Services; Derald Walker, Cascadia Behavioral Healthcare, Inc.; Charlotte Lehan, Clackamas County commissioner; Archbishop John Vlazny, Archdiocese of Portland
- **Information:** 503-231-4866

As a result, Villebois' rows of townhouses, condos and detached single-family houses include 10 acres that will eventually be filled with projects such as Rain Garden. With the exception of one Villebois resident who complained about the inclusion early on, the ability to blend adults with mental illness into the larger population has been seamless.

"We've spent a lot of time out there dispelling myths about mental illness," said Cindy Becker, director of Clackamas County's Department

of Human Services. "The goal is to have people integrated, so no one even knows they live in a mental-health facility."

Rain Garden's tenants range in age from 18 to mid-60s, said Royce Bowlin, senior director of residential treatment services for [Cascadia Behavioral Healthcare](#), which provides round-the-clock on-site services for residents.

Residents come from a variety of places, including group homes, family situations or the state hospital. All are screened to ensure they are capable of living on their own, he said.

"With proper medication management and regimen of counseling, these folks are able to function at a remarkably high level," said Dennis Keenan, executive director of [Catholic Charities of Oregon](#), Rain Garden's owner and developer. "These folks are fitting right in there."

Watson quickly agreed.

"I love it here," she said. "I just love it. It's first-class all the way."

In the three weeks since moving from a group home in Tigard, she has taken her first guitar lesson, decorated her studio apartment with heart-felt items such as a rug her mother wove for her and started venturing regularly to Villebois' Sunday farmers' market.

"I understand what it's like to hit rock bottom and be all alone," she said. "I'm finally in a place where I don't think that will ever happen again. Believe me, I couldn't be happier."

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