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Denise Resnik is seen with plans for a living center tailored for adults with autism at First Place's offices in Phoenix on Wednesday.

Build a brighter future

After 20 years of activism by a Phoenix businesswoman, construction begins on First Place complex for adults with autism

MARIA POLLETTA
THE REPUBLIC | AZCENTRAL.COM

At Denise Resnik's Phoenix office, in a back room crammed with books and paperwork, a massive poster nearly covers one wall.

In brilliant colors are the hopes parents of autistic children said they had for their kids' futures: safe relationships, fulfilling work, independence.

In gray are their fears: exploitation, abuse, loneliness.

For more than 20 years, Resnik — a prominent Valley business owner and mother to an autistic son — has pushed for a residential complex that would address both those hopes and fears.

On Tuesday, she and other community

leaders finally broke ground on First Place, a living center tailored to adults with autism and related disorders.

The \$15-million mixed-use development is expected to open in 2018 at Third Street and Catalina Drive. The complex will have 56 apartments with varying layouts, a training academy for residents and a leadership institute for medical professionals and researchers when it is complete.

Resnik recruited partners from business, real estate, medicine, education and other fields to design and raise money for First Place. It's one of the only projects of its kind.

"After my son, Matt, was diagnosed with autism, I worried about what would happen to him when I was no longer

around," Resnik said.

She co-founded the Southwest Autism Research & Resource Center in 1997 and started the First Place non-profit in 2012.

"I visited tons of facilities and was alarmed by what I saw, heard and smelled," Resnik said. "A friend told me, 'You have to stop looking for this perfect place you have in mind. It doesn't exist, and it won't until we build it.'"

More than 500,000 children and teens with autism will enter adulthood over the next decade. Many will lack the basic skills necessary to live on their own, Resnik said, but not because

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DENISE RESNIK
FIRST PLACE FOUNDER

First Place

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they are unable or unwilling to learn.

“The family home is a loving, supportive place, but think how much growth happens after we all move out,” she said. “Living on your own takes practice. We need to be giving people with autism and other special abilities the same opportunity to grow.”

First Place aims to promote that independence while maintaining appropriate support systems and safeguards, Resnik said. Officials chose the site largely for its proximity to public transportation, an urgent care and other amenities.

The housing component is designed to minimize sensory overload and other challenges commonly related to autism. Residents will have private bedrooms, kitchens and living space. An on-site wellness coordinator will monitor their daily health-care needs and show them how to manage them on their own when possible.

Some residents will attend two years of “Transition Academy” courses at GateWay Community College nearby, honing living skills from budgeting and cooking to managing relationships with roommates. They will develop professional skills and etiquette through volunteer positions and paid internships.

First Place will work with the community to identify business partners interested in hiring graduates, facilitating matches based on students’ strengths.

Officials envision First Place’s third component, the leadership institute, as a national training and certification center that will “exponentially increase the number of high quality, well-trained and credentialed direct-support service providers” in the field of autism. Research fellows from Arizona State University or Teach For America will live alongside residents and help out, Resnik said.

At \$42,000 a year, the combined cost of living at First Place and attending the academy is steep. Officials have “been working hard to create scholarship opportunities,” according to spokeswoman Rachael Myer Curley.

Rent starts at \$3,000 a month for First Place residents not attending the academy.

Officials began testing the First Place model two years ago at 29 Palms. At that 21-unit complex, adults with autism live alongside senior residents, collaborating on meals and activities.

“As Denise says, ‘If you’ve met one person with autism, you’ve met one person with autism,’” said Mike Trailor, Arizona Department of Housing director. “We need to do our best and develop as many options as possible for the varying needs of people with disabilities.”



MARIA POLLETTA/THE REPUBLIC

Lindsey Eaton, a 22-year-old with autism, will live at First Place when it opens.

“I love that it’s a community, and it’s safe, and it’s fun, and everyone cares about each other.”

LINDSEY EATON

FUTURE RESIDENT OF FIRST PLACE

Lindsey Eaton, a 22-year-old with autism, moved from her parents’ home to 29 Palms in September and will relocate to First Place once it opens.

“I love (living there),” Eaton said. “I love that it’s a community, and it’s safe, and it’s fun, and everyone cares about each other. I think it’s been a bigger transition for my parents than it has for me.”

Eaton said she has “faced a lot of misconceptions that I can’t do stuff” because of her autism.

“(People) think I can’t take the bus. I can,” she said. “They think I can’t cook. I can.”

Living at 29 Palms has allowed her to prove herself, she said, while also helping her address areas where she wants to improve, such as a “managing (social) interactions appropriately and knowing when I’ve crossed a line.”

Twice a week, she volunteers with Omni Bioceutical Innovations. She eventually wants a full-time job.

Brad Herron-Valenzuela, Transition Academy instructor, said students from 29 Palms arrive with varying skill sets and capabilities. But they all consistently display the same dogged motivation as Eaton.

“Attitude is a really important part of it,” he said. “Even before the student is selected for the program, we really need to see that buy-in.”

“This can’t be about their parents wanting them to do this, or anyone else. It all comes down to them.”

To apply for a spot at First Place, visit firstplaceaz.org and choose “The Process.”