

Creating Caring Communities The Hignell Companies

Yardi corporate blog feature by Leah Etling (publication date Oct. 30, 2012)
<http://www.yardi.com/blog/people/creating-caring-communities/3919.html>



Summer ice cream distribution by a Creating Caring Communities team.

Nice neighbors make for better apartment living experiences. For CEO Doug Hignell, creating a welcoming and caring environment at The Hignell Companies' apartment residences in Chico, Calif. was a longstanding desire. "Relationships are my passion: both with God and with people. My driving purpose centers on 'creating caring communities that transform lives', both personally and through [The Hignell Companies](#)," Hignell said.

Hignell's desire to comfort and connect led to establishing a non-profit arm of the family-owned property management, development, maintenance and construction firm founded by his father, Fred Hignell Jr. and partner Floyd Strange in 1948.

The effort takes some cues from Apartment Life's CARES Team ministry, which was generous in assisting Hignell as he started Creating Caring Communities.

The focus for Creating Caring Communities, just as its name states, is on creating community. Today, Creating Caring Communities has seven teams who live on site in Hignell apartment communities that range from 224 units to 88 units in size. In exchange for a rent-free unit, the teams (married couples, families, or single adults) are tasked with hosting an event for complex apartment residents each month, connecting with their neighbors on a daily basis, and bringing people together in a social and neighborly way. Teams spend a combined 15 to 20 hours each week working with their community, and are asked to commit to a two year service period. Their rent and event expenses are generated by each apartment community via a per-door fee.

"We are a religious non-profit. Our heart is about building community, but it is also loving on people, making them know they are of value and worth. If we have an opportunity to tell them there's a God who loves them, that's great, but that's not our focus. We don't feel like we're called to evangelize. Our teams are of a Christian denomination, and they are people of faith, but that's not our thrust. Our thrust is to build community and love on people," said Creating Caring Communities Director Janet Wietbrock.

Weekly events include dinners, meet your neighbor gatherings, socials, game nights, dessert nights, movie screenings, morning coffee giveaways, poolside ice cream and popsicles in the summer, a Senior Ball, holiday celebrations and more. There are community-wide charity efforts (a winter coat drive is ongoing) and creek cleanups, charity walks and canned food drives have been held in the past.

In the three years that the teams have been in place, Wietbrock said that the residents' understanding and appreciation of the teams and their mission has transformed.

"When we started this program, residents would come and get something to eat and then they would leave," she recalled. During a grab-and-go driveway breakfast offering held early on, people literally drove by. Now, they come to get coffee, chat, and stay awhile before moving on with their morning. Residents have started assisting the site teams with set-up and tear-down at various events. "It's gone from just the team doing it to it being a community that has taken ownership and wants to have a community that works together," Wietbrock said. The participating apartment

communities are multi-generational and include people of all backgrounds and walks of life, from college students to professionals to retirees.

The weekly gatherings are growing in size and achieving the desired result– neighbors know each other’s names, people watch out for each other, and every new resident is welcomed with a personal visit from the team when they move in. One community, a senior mobile home park, even got together to host a surprise baby shower for their event team before the couple had their first child.



Starting or growing families have been the No. 1 reason the teams leave their communities and move on to the next steps in their lives. An extensive interview process is required to replace them. Wietbrock recruits candidates from local churches, word of mouth and online advertising.

“We are looking for people who have a genuine heart for people. We can’t hire people with a religious agenda or people who would struggle loving on someone who is homosexual or loving on someone of a different ethnic or religious background. It is a lengthy interview process for us to discern that we’ve got someone who just wants to love and bless people.”

Residents of a Hignell community dress up in style for the Senior Ball.

A sense of empathy and compassion are vital as well. Teams not only plan social events, but reach out to assist residents who have been in the hospital or lost a loved one. They might provide meals to families who have suffered a tragedy or become sounding boards and a friendly ear to the residents. If someone needs professional help, they can be a guide to local resources.

The plan for Creating Caring Communities is to continue to grow the program, which is now three years old. Community building efforts such as this one are often credited with improving resident retention in apartment complexes, though such influence can be hard to track. Hignell properties also have traditionally strong retention rates – residents like them and often stay for many years. Having nice caring neighbors is one more reason not to move – or to move in.

“We have people who will come and tell us I heard about your Caring Community team and that’s why I’m moving my family here,” Wietbrock shared. “It really has positive implications beyond our focus of a spiritual implication. Our hope is that other owners and builders will say ‘Hey, we want to do this. We want to make our community a place where residents feel loved and cared for.’”