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Group delivers on promises with changes for Waco apartments



Damondre Williams, 8, looks at the cover of a magazine in the after-school area at Lakewood Villas apartment complex.

The buzz of fun and learning greets visitors to the after-school room at Lakewood Villas, a Waco apartment complex so violent a few years ago that police called it a war zone.

Company trying to improve apartments' once-troubled image with after-school program

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By Mike Copeland

Tribune-Herald business editor

The buzz of fun and learning greets visitors to the after-school room at Lakewood Villas, a Waco apartment complex so violent a few years ago that police called it a war zone.

Children wearing red “Lakewood” shirts ponder math problems or bounce in beanbag chairs. Soon, they will get a meal of pizza or chicken nuggets. Then, it’s outside for frolicking and fresh air.

The PPA Group of Austin bought the 200-unit complex at 1601 Spring St. in June for \$3 million. It promised big changes and apparently is delivering. It has renamed the complex Lakewood Villas Apartment Community and now is trying to change the culture.

A lot of youngsters in single-parent families live there. To serve their needs, PPA Group provides young people enrolled in its after-school program with a hot meal, help with homework and supervised playtime.

“I get off the bus, change my clothes and head over here,” said Christian Clakely, 11, a J.H. Hines fourth-grader who lives at Lakewood.

Thursday afternoon found him working through a math review packet provided not by his school but by the apartment complex.

Jillian Washington, a single mom who works at a local nursing home, said her 4-year-old son, Jase, loves interacting with other kids and learning from volunteers at the after-school club.

“I lived here once before, and things have gotten a lot better — management, maintenance, everything,” Washington said.

PPA Group does not have to do what it’s doing. Lakewood Villas is not a government-owned complex with federal requirements.

PPA wants to improve the lives of residents, but it also is looking at its bottom line. It believes happy residents will have a stake in the complex and take pride in it. Others will take notice, and the occupancy rate will rise. Long-term, PPA will have a more valuable piece of property if and when it sells, its managers say.

“Many of the residents are hardworking, responsible, single parents with multiple jobs living paycheck to paycheck,” said Richard Sorrentino, a PPA Group spokesman. They don’t always have time to give their

children the attention they need, so PPA is filling the void.

“As a company, we consider ourselves socially conscious. Our strategy is to look at the specific needs of tenants, with an eye toward turning around the image of an area and the mind-set of those who live there,” said Enland Hsiao, PPA asset manager.

Previously, Lakewood Villas was called The Villas on Lake Brazos. Before that, it was known as Pecan Gardens, a notorious locale.

Records show Waco police get a fraction more than one call per day, on average, at Lakewood Villas. The owners believe they can cut into that figure by giving kids something to do after school ends for the day.

They plan to build ballfields on extra land. Youngsters whose families may not have the money or transportation to let them play in off-site leagues will be welcome. PPA hopes to recruit volunteers to officiate baseball or football games, and youngsters will receive trophies.

PPA also has approached Baylor University about getting athletes involved in the lives of these young people.

Baylor students tutor on Fridays; other volunteers perform those tasks during the week. They not only help kids with homework, they keep in touch with their teachers to monitor performance.

John Garrison, Baylor assistant athletic director for marketing, said he is working to get complimentary football tickets for the young people through the “Briles Bunch” program named for new head coach Art Briles. Baylor also will make basketball tickets available.

Milet Hopping, Waco Housing Authority deputy executive director, said she marvels at what PPA has wrought at Lakewood Villas.

The WHA offers after-school programs, job training and family movie nights to residents of the government-owned housing complexes it manages: Kate Ross, Estella Maxey and South Terrace.

But it receives grants to accomplish these tasks. PPA is spending its own money, recruiting volunteers and soliciting donations. For example, Pilgrim’s Pride, the chicken giant, is donating after-school food to Lakewood.

“It’s wonderful for them to take the time to organize these events and impact the lives of people residing there,” Hopping said. “Anyone willing to offer these additional services is really doing a service to our community.”

The programs don’t stop with youngsters.

PPA has asked Heart of Texas Workforce Solutions to help adults living at the complex develop work skills and find stable employment.

Besides launching programs for residents, PPA is spending about \$150,000 to repair or replace appliances and air-conditioning units in the complex, where 325 people live. It also has or will repair guttering, re-stripe the parking lot, spruce up the landscaping and paint the complex.

It is pursuing a safer environment by performing “exhaustive criminal background checks” on those wanting to live there, Hsiao said, adding, “No one with a felony is allowed to go on the property.”

Laveda Brown, executive director of the Cen-Tex African American Chamber of Commerce, applauds what PPA is doing.

She, too, believes businesses can make money treating people right. “I have three words to say: awesome, wonderful and fantastic. We need more organizations that look at the community as a whole, not just at making money from the community,” Brown said. “If you approach things from that perspective, people will line up for you. This is a wonderful brainchild that needs to catch on like wildfire.”

Lakewood Villas has an occupancy rate of nearly 75 percent.

“We’d be pretty happy to get that into the mid-80s, and if things go well with some of our initiatives, 90 percent is realistic,” Hsiao said.

Rental rates at the complex range from \$460 to \$645 a month. Some residents receive Section 8 rental assistance.

PPA has taken steps to help residents at other properties it owns.

Earlier this month, it opened a second community learning center at its 332-unit complex in Grand Prairie.

“La Escuelita,” which means the small school, was launched with \$10,000 donations from Verizon and IBM. Spanish-speaking residents in the complex learn English through singing, reading and writing. They also pursue their high school equivalency diploma and increase their computer skills, Sorrentino said.

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