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EDITOR'S PICK   FEATURED

# HANDS-ON EXPERIENCE: LLCA students choose furnishings for mental health housing

Adam Smith   Feb 11, 2017



News Courier/Adam Smith

Lindsay Lane Christian Academy seniors Erin Gasque, left, and Shelley Jones inspect a chest of drawers Friday at the Maple Leaf triple: Elm Street in Athens. The students, who interned with the United Way of Athens-Limestone over the summer, helped select furniture and linens for the development, which will house nine adults with mental disorders.

It's not often a high school student is afforded the opportunity to make decisions that will impact the comfort and well-being of strangers for years to come.

Lindsay Lane Christian Academy Students Shelley Jones and Erin Gasque had that opportunity last year while interning with the United Way of Athens-Limestone. This week, they were able to see the fruits of their labors.

Jones and Gasque were tasked with finding furniture for the new Maple Leaf triplex housing development on Elm Street in Athens. The nine-unit development was constructed by the Mental Health Center of North Central Alabama with help from various community partners. It will house nine people who have illnesses such as schizophrenia and manic-depressive disorder.

Residents will be able to receive treatment and live in a modern home in close proximity to friends and loved ones.

As the project neared the finish line, local United Way Director Kaye Young McFarlen reached out to Bill Giguere of the MHCNCA and asked if her interns could be of any assistance. He said finding furniture and linens for the triplex seemed like an ideal challenge for the two young ladies.

“(The furniture) had to be rugged, durable, bedbug resistant and have institutional strength without looking institutional,” Giguere said. “Once they had the basic parameters and budgetary constraints, (the students) brought us a whole stack of stuff to look through and put it in an Excel spreadsheet.”

Those items included finding couches, beds, dressers and a variety of linens and other items designed to make the triplex feel like home for the new residents. Giguere and McFarlen both said they were proud of what the interns had accomplished.

“It fulfilled their volunteer requirements (at LLCA) but it also gave them a basis to interact with for-profits, nonprofits and get a taste of what it's like to come into an office, sit down, look things up, put things into a spreadsheet and have deadlines,” McFarlane said. “It was very successful for us.”

Leigh Andrews, volunteer administration manager, said she enjoyed watching the interns working together and learning new skills in a new environment.

“We saw them changing over two or three weeks and that was fun to watch,” she said. “They picked up those skills and began to think creatively to get to that final result.”

Shelley, who plans to major in communications at the University of North Alabama, said she didn't know what to expect when she agreed to volunteer last summer with United Way.

“It was nice getting to help people and get experience working in an office at the same time,” she said.

For Erin, the project enabled her to embrace two of her passions — graphic and interior design — along with a desire to work with those who have mental disorders.

“It was really cool I got to do both,” she said, adding she's considering enrolling at Nossi College of Art in Nashville. “It was a good experience for future projects or whatever I decide to do.”

## **Moving in**

Giguere said the MHCNCA received its Certificate of Occupancy from the city of Athens last fall. Community leaders gathered for a ribbon-cutting on the project in October, but the triplex has remained empty.

Giguere said he's now waiting on the go-ahead from the state so residents can start moving in. The nine residents who will occupy the triplex have already been identified and have been residing in adjacent mobile homes.

The project was funded through private donations from the Steelcase Foundation, the MHCNCA and its foundation, the Daniel Foundation, Limestone County Commission, the Melinda and Virginia Hutson Foundation and federal funds via the Community Reinvestment Act.

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