



■ Lyn Barnett, right, is joined by Al Bisbee, center, vice president of St. Joseph Community Land Trust, and Father Mauricio Hurtado at Sierra Gardens Apartments.

# St. Joseph Community Land Trust

## Tahoe's compassionate voice for sustainable, affordable housing

BY LYNETTE MAGNINO

**Lake Tahoe easily conjures mental images of stunning lake views, sun and snow, or tranquil respite time. But for the area's current and potential workforce, a real and formidable housing crisis threatens residents' health, safety and human dignity as well as the region's economic well-being.**

“The housing situation gets worse by the day,” says Lyn Barnett, co-founder and board chair of St. Joseph Community Land Trust (SJCLT) and a member of St. Theresa Parish in South Lake Tahoe. A Tahoe resident for 48 years, Lyn attests, “I’ve seen a lot of changes.” As a semi-retired professional land use planner, living amid the negative effects of those changes, he stands resolute with five fellow SJCLT board members, executive director Jean Diaz, and corporate chaplain Father Mauricio Hurtado, pastor of St. Theresa, to find solutions.

Now, reflecting on SJCLT’s 20th anniversary, Lyn sums it up in a phrase. “Big things have small beginnings,” he says, referring to the non-profit’s progress and housing relief on the horizon. But, not without long-lasting awareness of the small beginnings – the troubling signs – that Lyn witnessed decades ago: Families who worked in Tahoe could not afford to live there.

“In the ‘90s, I was on the pastoral council,” Lyn

recalls, noting his firsthand experience of struggling to reopen the parish school in 1994, which had been closed since 1969 (and would ultimately close again in 2014).

“School families couldn’t find affordable housing and many lived in rental housing,” he explains, attributing the flux then to the dot-com frenzy in the Bay Area. “Financial advisors were telling clients to diversify and buy real estate,” feeding the vacation home rental boon while worsening area housing challenges.

Many families were evicted as home prices climbed to new, unaffordable heights. Or they were forced to make choices between substandard housing, longer commutes, traffic, fatigue or simply leaving the region altogether, upending the local business community and economy, too, as employers struggled to recruit and fill positions, as they still do today.

“**People often assume that everyone is wealthy in Lake Tahoe, but that’s not the case and increasingly people aren’t able to afford rent, own or even dream of owning a home.”**

**Father Mauricio Hurtado**



■ Sierra Gardens Apartments in South Lake Tahoe is a low-to-moderate income subsidy project stressing values of dignity and community in response to the Tahoe Basin's housing crisis.



■ Jean Diaz

By April 2000, despite positive strides for the parish and a complete rebuild of the original 1953 church building, Lyn remembers feeling down. “We’d done something good for the parish, but we needed to do more for the community,” he shares. Exactly what, remained unclear.

“I attended a professional planners’ conference in New Orleans,” Lyn recounts, sharing how the venue for the closing session could not accommodate all 8,000 attendees.

As fate would have it, 400 attendees, including Lyn, would choose smaller break-out sessions.

“I hadn’t heard of community land trusts,” he explains, but he chose a session on the topic “because the instructor was from St. Cloud, Minnesota, near where my mom grew up,” Lyn admits candidly.

“I left that training session so excited,” he conveys, enthusiastic for the land trust model that promises quality, affordable and sustainable housing in the Tahoe Basin. “I really do believe it was fate,” he insists.

### **Fostering human dignity, averting the stress of poverty**

Lyn returned to Tahoe to form a steering committee and begin the hard work of visioning and building the land trust. He and fellow parishioner and co-founder Patrick Conway worked tirelessly and met biweekly at all the parishes throughout the basin – from Truckee to Tahoe City, from Round Hill to South Lake Tahoe.

“We knew we wanted to be a Catholic lay organization,” Lyn says, expressing how the wisdom of Catholic social teaching was at the heart of their quest for just and merciful housing solutions.

They met with the Dioceses of Sacramento and Reno to share their dream while also retaining autonomy to leverage their unique understanding and compassion for the region, which straddles two dioceses and two states.

“I remember meeting with Bishop Philip Straling in Reno,” Lyn says, describing the unscheduled appointment. “In our conversation, it was his devotion to St. Joseph” and his convincing words that as the patron of homebuilders and carpenters, he would be the ideal patron and namesake for the land trust. St. Kateri Tekakwitha was chosen as co-patron, representative of their commitment to protect the environment.

St. Joseph Community Land Trust incorporated in January 2002 with bylaws clearly stating its purpose as “inspired by the social teachings of the Roman Catholic Church.”

“We met with Bishop Jaime Soto last July,” Lyn adds, commenting on the continuing relationship with the church. “We’re so appreciative of the bishop’s support,” he stresses, relentless in his belief that if you “start small, have faith, and do what you can,” if it’s right, it will happen.

### **What is a community land trust?**

Jean, executive director, celebrates the community land trust model for its flexibility and the latitude to “design programs to reflect a community’s needs and resources.” He describes a structure that holds land in “trust” for community needs, outside of market pressures with various funding sources and partners contributing their own expertise to the mission.

“We receive a lot of grants and donations,” Jean says, emphasizing the importance of generating matching funds and fulfilling grantor requirements. For example, SJCLT is the beneficiary of sizable grants from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD), which now enters the final year of a three-year cycle. SJCLT received \$25,000 in 2021 and \$40,000 in 2020. Jean notes CCHD funds were earmarked for operations and helped SJCLT realize its goal to hire a full-time program and stewardship manager.

“One of the things I feel very good about is that we cover from just above homelessness to 120 percent of area median income (AMI),” Jean explains, referring to an illustrative “housing ladder” analogy. “We often hope

the housing ladder is a one-way street,” he continues, elaborating on common goals to save money and keep moving up, but any number of setbacks can force one to slip down the ladder.

SJCLT expands and preserves affordable rental and ownership housing by maintaining ownership of land (which is often gifted or sold to the trust well below market value), managing resales, stewarding assets and monitoring holdings to ensure permanent affordability. Its programs include two rental housing projects which provide subsidized options for middle to low-income households beginning at 30 percent of AMI. Sierra Garden Apartments has 76 units, sits on four acres and has undergone many SJCLT improvements to foster community, convenience and connectivity for residents.

Sugar Pine Village represents the first new construction of its type in decades. Partnering with Related California, a large builder specializing in affordable housing, SJCLT will commence work on Sugar Pine in 2023 with a vision for 248 units built on land recently released by the state to mitigate the housing crisis. The masterplan includes meeting spaces, integrated social services, a community garden and reserved open space designed to protect the environment while offering inviting trails to the community.

SJCLT also will build three homes on land secured from the city of South Lake Tahoe. When complete, these homes will be sold to low-to-moderate income families who qualify at an affordable price and the opportunity to build upon accumulated value while SJCLT maintains the land in trust, holding a 99-year ground lease with restrictions on sales to preserve affordability and ensure homes are never lost to the market.

Lyn indicates that a recent housing assessment conducted by the Tahoe Prosperity Center suggests that

these projects are projected to satisfy 25 percent of the need for quality, affordable and sustainable housing in the Tahoe Basin. Small beginnings, yes, but extremely significant as SJCLT increases the affordable housing inventory and explores potential projects.

### **A membership organization**

As a membership organization, anyone anywhere – businesses and individuals – can pay \$25 for annual membership in support of the good work of SJCLT. Residents are automatic members, at no charge, and benefits include access to a range of other services including community education on home buying, financial literacy and emergency preparedness. SJCLT also offers special assistance and no-interest loan programs to aid members in emergencies or to facilitate families with school-age children to move from dire motel settings to more acceptable apartment environments.

The membership structure “is a way we can identify people who might make good board members or committee members,” Jean adds, citing how low-income leadership on the board is a goal of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development.

Lyn highlights a key word in SJCLT’s mission statement: dignity. “A lot of (apartment) units might focus on simply ‘warehousing’ people,” he says. SJCLT works to “respect every person, one at a time, hearing them out and encouraging them.” †



**St. Joseph Community Land Trust works to “respect every person, one at a time, hearing them out and encouraging them.”** Lyn Barnett



### **LEARN MORE**

- ABOUT ST. JOSEPH COMMUNITY LAND TRUST AT [WWW.SAINTJOSEPHCLT.ORG](http://WWW.SAINTJOSEPHCLT.ORG).
- ABOUT THE CATHOLIC CAMPAIGN FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AT [WWW.SCD.ORG/CHARITIES/CCHD](http://WWW.SCD.ORG/CHARITIES/CCHD).

## **THE WORK OF A CORPORATE CHAPLAIN**

■ “For me, it is a beautiful opportunity to bring God into these works,” says Father Mauricio Hurtado of his role with St. Joseph Community Land Trust (SJCLT).

He considers how people often assume that everyone is wealthy in Lake Tahoe, but “that’s not the case and increasingly people aren’t able to afford rent, own or even dream of owning a home,” he appeals, describing the common scenario of

workers “who need to have two or three jobs to even pay rent.”

Father Mauricio opens and closes SJCLT meetings with prayer, and advises the board on moral or ethical matters, “when there are any doubts,” he explains, clarifying the board’s desire to act justly with compassion, without doubt.

Father Mauricio says SJCLT is “a clear response to the needs of the people” operating within the

framework of Catholic social teaching. “It’s important that people know what we mean by that,” he insists, distinguishing that a just society occurs by addressing real community issues in the context of faith.

“What you did for the least of my brothers, you did for me,” Father Mauricio says, quoting Matthew, chapter 25. He knows SJCLT is part of the solution to the Tahoe Basin housing crisis.