



*Marylou Burnside, a resident at El Verano Apartments, a senior affordable housing community in Anaheim (Spectrum News/Joseph Pimentel)*

HOUSING

## El Verano Apartments in Anaheim gives formerly homeless seniors a home

BY JOSEPH PIMENTEL | ORANGE COUNTY  
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ANAHEIM, Calif. — For six months after moving into a brand new one-bedroom affordable housing apartment, Marylou Burnside couldn't sleep in the bedroom. It didn't seem real to the retired 66-year-old that her situation had changed.

### What You Need To Know

- Homeless and at-risk seniors find a new home at El Verano Apartments in Anaheim
- The El Verano is a brand new \$27 million, 54-unit senior affordable housing development by Innovative Housing Opportunities

Just two years ago, Burnside, and her Chihuahua, Baby Girl Rose, was sleeping underneath a bus stop next to the Anaheim Public Library after being unable to pay rent at a motel.

Burnside used the bathroom at a nearby Starbucks. She slept on the street for four months before friends found her and placed her in the Salvation Army homeless shelter, where she stayed for two years.

She was then placed to be a resident in a new affordable housing complex.

Burnside had submitted her name for housing to City Net, a nonprofit that helps homeless individuals.

Now, here she is, inside a one-bedroom apartment that she calls the Babe Cave. She's still adjusting, she said.

"I've only started sleeping on my bed," said Burnside to Spectrum News. "For the past six months, I've been sleeping on the couch. I didn't want to sleep on the bed because I'm wanting to make sure if this is real. That's what I was trying to do. Is this for sure real? Is someone going to pop (my dream) or take it away for me?"

Her home, along with the formerly homeless and low-income seniors, is real.

Santa Ana-based Innovative Housing Opportunities, an affordable housing developer, built [the El Verano Apartments](#), a brand new three-story, 54-unit affordable senior apartment community on Lincoln Avenue.

The \$27 million permanent-supportive community, which houses seniors ages 62 and over, replaced the old Sandman Motel, which the [city of Anaheim purchased in 2017](#) as a way to close it. The motel had a history of criminal activity. The city leased the land to Innovative Housing Opportunities.

The new Spanish-style designed apartment community features an on-site case property manager, a health office where medical personnel can treat residents on-site, a computer lab, two outdoor areas and plenty of activities.

Market-rate rent starts at \$1,600 for a one-bedroom, and the two-bedroom units are \$2,100. Residents, most of whom live off of Social Security, only pay a maximum of 30% of their income. The rest of the balance is picked up by the Department of



Each unit came fully furnished, said Rochelle Mills, the president and CEO of Innovative Housing Opportunities.

Mills said the goal is to have these senior residents socialize and connect. For years, many of these residents lived on their own on the street, in shelters or motels.

"We're starting to bring experiential learning opportunities to the site," said Mills, adding that they are working with museum officials at the Muzeo to bring art classes to El Verano. "We want them to build trust and get comfortable. We are trying to connect and build an ongoing relationship and consistency with them."

Mills said the El Verano sets the bar high for other affordable senior communities. Because of the high-end design and amenities, from the outside, no one would ever think the apartment was for low-income or formerly homeless people.

Mills said even some of the residents were surprised by the beauty of the apartment community. When they first came to move in, Mills said a couple of residents believed they had the wrong address, turned around and left before coming back.

Mills said many of the residents' biggest fear is waking up one day and finding out that they happened to get this place by accident or have to move out.

"That's heartbreaking," said Mills. "But we want them to know that this is not a shelter. This is permanent housing."

Unfortunately, Mills added, there is not enough affordable housing for those in need. There's usually a 10-year waitlist for affordable senior housing, she said.

"We need to build more," said Mills, adding that people should sign up as soon as possible if they are homeless or at-risk of homelessness.



For Burnside, she feared that after moving in, that at any time, she would get kicked out. She didn't want to get too comfortable. The last time she lived on her own in an apartment was in 1997.

"The first six months was the hardest. It's a big adjustment," said Burnside, who had lived in motels before finding herself homeless and in a shelter after her mother died of leukemia several years ago. "I didn't want to stay here. I had myself convinced that I was going to leave at the end of the year."

The pink-haired Burnside, who speaks with an upbeat attitude, then made friends with a woman named Esther across the hall.

"She's the tightest person I know. She always checks in on me all the time," said Burnside. "Actually, a lot of residents here are checking in with each other to make sure they are OK. A lot of people are still adjusting."

Burnside also befriended a man who used a wheelchair, and who takes her dog, Baby Girl, out for rides.

"It's the cutest thing," she said.

On the front of her door, Burnside has a poem written on a piece of cardboard, welcoming visitors:

"Roses are red, Violets are blue, Beware of my little chihuahua, She will love you."

Some nights, she'll stand on her patio and watch the fireworks from Disneyland light up the Anaheim sky.

"It feels good to be here," she said. "I'm not in a dorm with 22 women, fighting for showers or dealing with bullies. I'm in my own world, and I can control my own world."

She began to sob, reflecting on her life. Her mom died of leukemia in 2017, which began a downward spiral. Her dad, who served in the army for 32 years, had died several years ago, but lessons from him taught her how to plan and survive when she was homeless on the street.

She hung a picture of both of them on the wall in her living room.

"It's wonderful that I have my freedom back," she said. "That's the most important thing in my life to get my freedom back. I am able to make choices, decisions and control my environment. I'm able to pay bills and make friends."

"My freedom is important to me," her voice trails.

Now, she pushes herself to do something different every day. She's embracing her new community. She can't wait until the community manager begins hosting games of bingo.