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BY MARTI MAGUIRE - Correspondent



RALEIGH -- Early on, Chris Parrish found room for improvement at the Southeast Raleigh mobile home park he runs with his father.

Kids were tossing footballs in the 20-foot sliver between trailers or fishing in the park's pond without knowing how to unhook their catch. Residents were changing the oil in their cars and dumping the used filters on the ground.

So Parrish set about fixing things, and his improvements have snowballed. Parrish Manor, off Jones Sausage Road, now boasts a soccer field, a community garden, playgrounds, free trips to the Boys and Girls Club, and the list goes on.

Some solutions he devised himself - he cleared and laid sod on a kudzu-strangled field and added a car maintenance shed, for instance. Others, such as the organic garden overseen by the InterFaith Food Shuttle, he accomplished through grants and partnerships.

Last year, Parrish landed a three-year, \$85,000 state grant to get his residents exercising more by adding a walking trail, picnic area and sports programs for kids at the soccer field, part of an effort to stem childhood obesity, which is particularly common in low-income families.

Grant coordinator Marjorie Lanier says it's rare to find a developer so interested in the health of his community - or so prolific in his improvement efforts.

"In the public health world, we don't come across too many like Chris," says Lanier, who coordinates the state's Healthy Places, Active Spaces grant program. "What he's doing is pretty remarkable."

Parrish rattles off programs so numerous it's hard to keep up - visits from mobile petting zoos and dental clinics, a walking program using pedometers, healthy cooking classes - but he punctuates his list with shrugs, as if rounding up such services for his tenants is simple common sense.

"We try to put ourselves in their shoes," says Parrish, 38, who grew up in Smithfield. "You think, 'How would you want your family to grow up?' and then you make it happen."

A Halloween party

Lines of perfect white rectangles wind around the paved streets of Parrish Manor - 280 homes with driveways, sidewalks and tiny, immaculate yards.

Landscapers mow the grass and pick up trash.

The 70-acre site was farmland when his grandfather bought it in the 1950s. His father had it zoned for mobile homes, but it took the family until the mid-1990s to get water and sewer service there.

By then, Parrish had earned his bachelor's degree from UNC-Chapel Hill and was considering law school. But he changed plans and earned a master's in business administration - better preparation for entering the family business.

Parrish's father, Charles Parrish, had some experience as a developer of stick-built and mobile homes. But Parrish Manor, which opened in 1998, was the family's largest such undertaking.

At the time, the mobile home industry was suffering a post-bubble decline similar to that of the overall real estate market in recent years. The Parrishes couldn't sell their mobile homes, so they rented them.

They now rent 80 percent of the homes, which range from \$695 a month for a two-bedroom to \$975 for a four-bedroom. Such a large rental community of mobile homes is rare, considered by many to be too risky and unstable.

The Parrishes counter that risk by keeping close tabs on their tenants, screening them carefully before they move in and evicting people for unruly behavior. "We're not one of those places where if you pay rent, we look the other way," Parrish says.

They have also tried to keep stable tenants by making the neighborhood a nice place to live. Parrish says they started out by providing a Halloween party and parade.

Then a nearby church offered to bring presents and a visit from Santa Claus at Christmas.

When he decided those foundering fishermen needed mentors, transportation was his key problem in getting them to area Boys and Girls Clubs. So he started a nonprofit in 2006 to be able to accept donations toward a used school bus he bought. That year, roughly nine Parrish Manor kids regularly went to the club. Last summer, about 50 went.

'This place is different'

Parrish says he considers himself the "mayor of a little town" of about 900 residents, nearly half of them children. And he has learned that his town sits in what is known as a "food and recreation desert" - there is no grocery store nearby, and until he cleared out his field, there were no parks or ball fields.

"There was no place to run around," he says. "And the only food around was all fast food."

He learned that lots of nonprofits are looking to help the low-income, often minority families in his community. So he calls them up, one by one.

"My whole thing is to try to get people who have the services to come to us," he says. "We have the population they're looking for."

The community's links to a range of services has been a boon for Brenda Grothe and her three sons, ages 6, 14 and 16. Her youngest loves the new after-school sports classes. Her teenagers are working with the county to research recreational activities for a teen-centered website.

"I've seen other trailer parks before," says Grothe, 34. "But this place is different."

For his next project, Parrish has set his sights on a community center that would double as a tornado shelter - making it eligible for FEMA grants that would cover much of the \$1.3 million cost.

Parrish calls this plan his "craziest idea yet," but as he talks about the potential of a larger space - moving his Zumba fitness classes from the tiny clubhouse living room, offering English as a Second Language classes - he uses the word "will" more than "might" or "could."

"We call him the bullet train, because he just has this incredible capacity to get things done at breakneck speed," says Lanier, the grant coordinator.

Lanier would like to see more affordable communities focusing on residents' health. And Parrish has plugged his nonprofit work at industry meetings - trying to guilt the huge corporations that own most mobile home parks nationwide into action, he says: "If I can do this, anyone can."

CHRISTOPHER CHARLES PARRISH

Born: Feb. 6, 1973, in Smithfield

Residence: Raleigh

Career: Co-owner, Parrish Manor; founder and director, The Nessie Foundation; member and past president, N.C. Manufactured and Modular Homebuilders Association; board member, NCMHA Scott Morton Scholarship Committee; member and past chairman, National Communities Division, Manufactured Housing Institute

Honors: Parrish Manor was awarded the Sir Walter Raleigh Award for Outstanding Maintained Appearance, 2008, and Community of the Year, Southern Region, Manufactured Housing Institute, 2008

Education: B.A., political science, UNC-Chapel Hill; MBA, Appalachian State University

Family: Wife, Colleen, a nurse practitioner; children, Ella, 3; and Keegan, 1

Fun facts: An Olde English theme is omnipresent at Parrish Manor. The playground is called Sherwood Forest and boasts a stone castle with a drawbridge. The numbers on each house are inscribed in a coat of arms. Suits of armor man the office, and a sword stuck in a large stone like King Arthur's sits out front. Parrish's nonprofit, the Nessie Foundation, is named after the Loch Ness Monster replica that lives in the community's fishing pond.