

Housing challenges claim dream job

November 11, 2020

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ISLAMORADA - A state park ranger has given up on finding affordable housing to continue her dream job of serving here.

Helen Grekel is a single mother of three children who works full-time as a ranger at the state park service. After seven years, she is leaving Islamorada because she cannot make ends meet due to the high cost of housing. She is off to North Carolina, where she has family, and her fiancé has family as well.

"The cost of living is so much less expensive there.

There's affordability," Grekel said, adding she could have a house with 5 acres on a mountain with a pool for the \$1,700 a month rent plus utilities she is paying in Tavernier now for a two-bedroom, one bath.

According to a state park newsletter, Grekel (formerly Keller) worked in various careers before seeking a position in the Florida Park Service. She fell in love with the park service after spending three years volunteering at state and national parks across the South in an RV named Matilda. Grekel says she was inspired to pursue a career in the park service while she was knee-deep in the swamp as a volunteer at Everglades National Park.

"While leading an interpretive field trip, I found myself stuck in the mucky slough, being bitten by gnats and mosquitoes and concerned about mating alligators," Grekel said in the park's newsletter. "I couldn't help but watch in awe as nearly two dozen high-schoolers learned to differentiate between sawgrass and cattails, to identify apple channel snails and to point out tree islands. These students an hour prior had been afraid to step off the concrete, and I was able to witness their transformation when they literally stepped into nature.

That tour is what led me to pursue a career with the park service."

Grekel knew she wanted to work for Lignumvitae Key Botanical State Park in Islamorada after learning one of her favorite childhood books was written on the island by former caretaker Charlotte Niedhauk. The book, "Charlotte's Story," chronicles the adventures and hardships of island life on Elliott Key in the 1930s.

Grekel admired Niedhauk's "ability to thrive despite the harsh conditions on Elliott Key, her passion for helping others and her seemingly always positive attitude, considering island life in the 1930s."

In some ways, Niedhauk's struggle is Grekel's struggle.

Grekel has enjoyed her outdoor adventures but the challenge of housing has been unreal. She was living at 292 Gardenia Street adjacent to Plantation Key School for nine months, a two-story concrete building known by some as the "crack house" due to questionable activity on its grounds and the unsanitary conditions that seemed to pervade the living situations.

"There was a lot of drug use," Grekel said. "A constant flux in and out of the building. There were nights we were nervous."

She and her children lived on the top floor, so for the most part, she could keep her head above the melees down below and her nose clean, especially since she had signed an ethics clause with the park service. She had had to escape a terrible personal situation along with her 18-year-old daughter and two sons, 13 and 8, and this was the most affordable deal she could find quickly while in desperate circumstances. She paid \$1,300 monthly, which included water, but if she got behind on rent, her water got turned off, she said. She found the situation intimidating, and after the family moved out, it was with a sigh of relief.

"We survived. To quote my 13-year old, 'It's only upward from here,'" Grekel said.

John S. Mannix of Sundance Construction owned the building and issued verbal eviction orders, said Grekel, as the property sold to Chris Sante, a former Islamorada mayor and councilman. Tenants had to be out by Christmas 2019.

Nevertheless, she lived there with her kids from May 2019 through January, until she found a new rental in Tavernier. She had to scramble and work side jobs to be able to come up with first and last month's rent on the new place. A month ago, 292 Gardenia was razed, and when affordable housing is built there, the expected rent is \$2,300 - "not affordable to me," she said.

Sante said he purchased the property in January, and the Monroe County property appraiser showed 292 Gardenia Street sold for \$539,000 on Jan. 13, 2020.

Sante said he never owned the property because he transferred the warranty deed to the village for \$1.

"Come to think of it, I never got my dollar!" he said, adding that his goal, as others also sought to purchase the property, was to preserve the property for future workforce/affordable housing, and that is why he immediately signed over the deed to the village.

Acting Village Manager Maria Bassett said last month that the village paid \$21,500 to J.A. LaRocco Enterprise Inc. to demolish the structure on one of the four lots comprising the location at 292 Gardenia.

The village purchased the property for the purpose of developing affordable/workforce housing.

"I will confer with the new members of the Village Council for guidance on how they would prefer staff proceed with the development at this location, and at the location we refer to as the Woods lots on the corner of Woods, Gardenia and the Overseas Highway," Bassett said. "I will ask them how they would like to proceed and whether their preference is that the 'Achievable Housing Committee' evaluate this effort first."

That volunteer committee is comprised of village residents appointed by the council.

"[Former village manager Seth Lawless] tried to work out a couple of arrangements for developing both areas that did not work out," Bassett said. "One developer was moving forward with site plan submissions to the planning department, but the related lease agreement we entered into had expired. I asked that developer to suspend his efforts until I could review everything with the new Village Council."

Following two separate requests for proposals, the village has three affordable housing developers who expressed interest in developing these locations. A fourth developer also expressed interest, said Bassett.

"It is more cost-effective for the two locations to be considered by one developer versus splitting them out. Questions remain on the type of structures to be developed, whether they should be for sale or for rent and whether they should be attached or individual [units]," Bassett said. "Staff's preliminary recommendation is that standalone units be developed similar to those at 97 Orange Lane and that they be for sale. The 300 units coming to the village [from the state] for affordable housing development purposes may only be used for rentals. Ultimately, we would prepare and issue an RFP to develop those areas specifically."

The village currently has 133 deed-restricted workforce/affordable units approximately. The list is being studied and updated, said the acting manager.

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