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MEET YOUR NEIGHBORS

Woman to realize dream with opening of group home



ANDREW MILLS/THE STAR-LEDGER

Keely Freeman's project of the past five years — the foundation of a group home for at-risk youth — will become a reality this month with the opening of Sierra House in East Orange, which will house up to 20 women from ages 16 through 21.

Name: Keely Freeman

Age: ■

Accomplishment: Founder of Sierra House

Hometown: Freeman was raised in Newark and has resided in East Orange's First Ward for seven years. She lives on the first floor of a two-family home that she shares with her mother.

Background: Freeman's history of selflessness leads back to her early years growing up in Newark, where she was always active in the community. Freeman enjoyed activities such as preparing food for the homeless and tutoring children.

A graduate of Science High School in Newark, she attended Rutgers University in New Brunswick, majoring in economics. Upon graduating, Freeman worked for a couple of years in the for-profit arena while striking a balance between volunteerism and the day-to-day needs of her professional life. Her passion remained with the community, so in 2002, Freeman decided she would take a chance by quitting her job to make community service her full-time occupation through the establishment of a housing shelter for at-risk youth, which she called Sierra House.

Making the shift from the for-profit to the nonprofit sector "was scary," Freeman said. "For

five years I did this project and earned nothing." But since 2002, Freeman has been able to acquire a facility for Sierra House and attend New York University, where she earned a master's degree in nonprofit management in June.

A memory: When Freeman was about 16 years old, she had a friend whose uncle worked at a fish store on West Kinney Street in Newark. When the fish were no longer fresh for selling, instead of throwing them out, the man would cook them for the homeless. After Freeman's friend informed her that her uncle needed help at the store, they both decided to volunteer. Freeman rode the bus to the store every Sunday that summer to pitch in by putting the fish on bread, wrapping it in aluminum foil and handing it out to the many homeless people who would line up inside the small store.

"It was a really good experience to know at a young age when I didn't have anything financially to give to this society that I could do something to give back," she said. "It let me know on a firsthand basis that I could do good in the community, that something so little from me could do good in someone's life."

Taking action: In 2002, in the wake of a highly publicized tragedy of abused and neglected children within the state child pro-

TECTIVE system, Freeman decided that someone had to offer some alternative for at-risk youth. That same year, she co-founded Sierra House, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to provide housing and life skills training to at-risk youth.

Freeman chose an old Victorian-style home for Sierra House that charmed her immediately. The house looked like a safe haven to Freeman.

"We wanted the house to remain a house; we wanted the house to be a part of the community," she said.

But in order to make Sierra House a congregate dwelling, it had to meet the standards of the zoning board, which includes being accessible to those with disabilities. In 2005, Freeman received a grant from the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs. With that grant, during the past four years she has been able to renovate the facility to bring it up to code.

Her inspiration: "Growing up in an urban neighborhood and growing up poor, I always thought I wanted to make money, but even when I worked in the for-profit chapter, my heart was always with the community," Freeman said.

"Because these people are invisible in the community, someone needed to take action," she

added. "Nobody deserves to be homeless, especially not our young children, and hopefully Sierra House can make a difference."

Milestones: In addition to funding by NJDCA, this year, Freeman was awarded a grant by the Avon Hello Tomorrow Fund. With this funding, Freeman will be able to begin a transitional program that will help provide children with job skills training and independent living skills.

Sierra House is scheduled to open its doors this month at 11 South Maple Ave., East Orange, and will house up to 20 women from ages 16 through 21.

Goals: Freeman hopes that in a few years, she can start an additional facility for young men.

Hobbies: Freeman likes reading when she finds time, along with skiing and traveling.

Family: "I come from a large family, I think my family is very supportive, emotionally and financially. With my family, I was able to do this."

To help: Sierra House has an open door policy, so those requiring assistance should call (973) 678-3556, visit www.sierrahouse.org or e-mail kfreeman@sierrahouse.org.

— Reva McEachern