

Midwestern Charm Meets Midtown Class

Hills Properties' upscale yet unpretentious
Palmera Apartments, outside of Cincinnati,
is the 2013 NAA PARAGON Community of the Year.

BY LAUREN BOSTON





When Palmera Apartments opened in 2011, the waiting list there was more than 150 people.

Last summer, the Mason, Ohio, fire department asked Hills Properties' Palmera Apartments if they could use the community's maintenance shop as a temporary firehouse for a few nights. A nearby street was closed off and they wanted to be close by should any emergency calls come in.

The local firefighters brought in recliners and a flat-screen TV, and piled mattresses on the floor. The bright red fire truck was parked next to the community's basketball court.

"There were a few kids who asked questions and wanted to climb all over the fire engine, but the best part was our single female residents who couldn't wait to catch a glimpse of our local heroes," says Leasing Consultant Carrie Fenley.

Described by some as a modern-day Pleasantville, this 2013 NAA PARAGON Community of the Year holds true to the Midwestern standard of neighborliness. The 360-unit community is located just outside of Cincinnati and boasts many luxury amenities that are unique to the area—yet none can compare to the friendly and familial environment it's created.

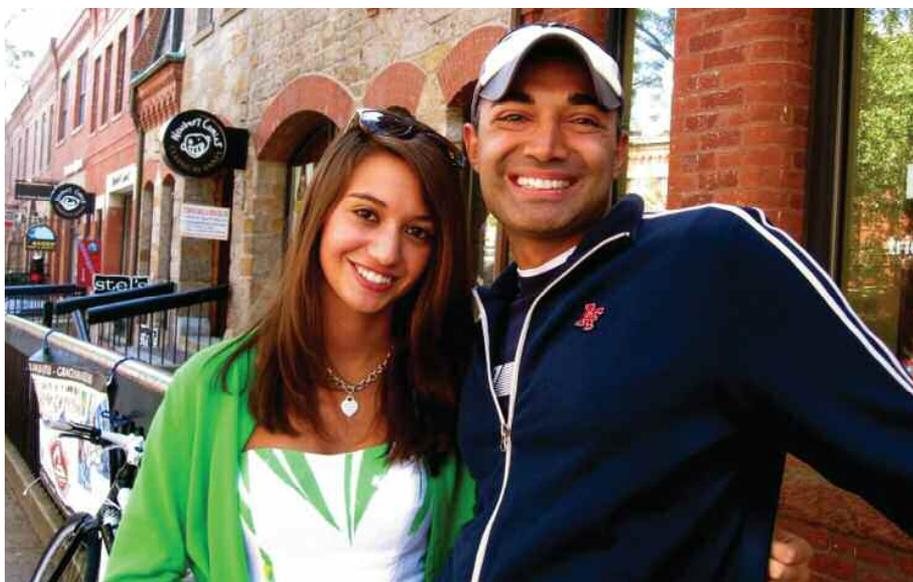
"Palmera has more of a sense of community than anywhere else I've worked," Fenley says. "I love watching all of the dogs play together while their owners catch up. There are many friendly smiles and waves. What we most often hear from our residents is that Palmera offers such a sense of home. They just seem to be genuinely happy here."

Dirt Dreams

Residents who are willing to pay hundreds of dollars more per month to improve their position on a 150-person waiting list would likely rise to the top of any apartment owner's pie-in-the-sky wish list. But at Palmera Apartments, such (unaccepted) bribes were very much a reality.

"The blueprint alone was impressive enough for me to fall for it," says Ben Colaco, one of Palmera's first residents. "The staff was working in a leasing trailer and there wasn't anything to see except floor plans and renderings, but it all looked so nice. I didn't want to miss this opportunity."

Kelly Johnson, Vice President of Operations, says, "The demand for this location and product during the lease-up period



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*—Ben Colaco
Resident*

surpassed any of our expectations. I have been working in this industry for 23 years, in more than 20 markets, and I’ve never seen a product more well-received by the customer.”

Although the extent of their success was surprising, most Palmera associates say they had high expectations for the community from the beginning.

“I’ve been part of Palmera’s team since the property was a pile of dirt and a dream,” Fenley says. “From the first time I saw the renderings of the clubhouse and buildings and held the tiny sample of granite for the countertop in my hands, I knew Palmera was going to be successful. We’ve all given Palmera our blood, sweat and tears to help make this vision a reality.”

Palmera was built from beginning to end out of a collaboration of ideas. Johnson says all who were involved influenced everything from the brochure to the signage, colors, finishes and even the water fountain in the entry.

“I love walking through the site and seeing all of those conversations come to life in the final product,” she says.

Although Palmera’s land was pur-

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chased in 2001, development was put on hold—first by rental market delays and then the financial crisis of 2008. New site plans were revisited in 2009, and in Spring 2011 the first residents finally moved in.

After a decade of planning and postponements, Senior Vice President Rusty Lykes says the Grand Opening was especially meaningful.

“I remember searching for a parking spot and I chose what I thought was an available space in front of a seemingly vacant garage,” he recalls. “As I rounded the building to access the walkway, I saw an older couple sitting on the patio and confirmed that I had just parked in their driveway. They told me they were in for the night and I could leave my car. I ended up talking to them for over an hour, and they told me they were so happy they moved

into Palmera and that this would likely be their last home together, as they were ‘getting up there in years.’

“Several hours later as the party was coming to a close, I headed back to my car and saw the older couple still sitting on their patio. There are so many different things about Palmera that mean something special to each resident.”

Homey Meets High End

Palmera Apartments may have the charm of small town America, but it has the class of city living.

The community was the first of its kind in the Cincinnati area, and is “as close to a resort as you could find in the Midwest,” Fenley says.

Popular amenities include a resident coffee bar, outdoor space with a fireplace,



lounge seating and a flat-screen TV, a lounging pool with fountains and cabana seating, a tennis court, and Resident Retreat—a common space that includes Wi-Fi, a game room, a cyber café and an entertainment kitchen.

With 14 different floor plans available ranging in size from 803 square-feet to 1,762 square-feet of interior living space, Palmera Apartments' unique units include simulated wood flooring, chef-ready kitchens and wrap-around balconies that serve as second living or dining rooms during the warm months. Residents also have use of attached and direct-access garages, as well as a building intercom entry.

"It's the sexiest property on the market," says Maria Lashells, Director of Marketing. "We wanted the customer to have something he or she couldn't find anywhere else in Cincinnati. We took the best of what we found at communities in larger cities and put it into one knock-out package. The setting has pure suburban appeal and the clubhouse, amenities and apartments are as forward-thinking as you can find in this area."

Johnson says Cincinnati as a whole has been slow to tap into the renter-by-choice concept when compared to other markets, and the idea that a renter would prefer high-end finishes and exceptional communal space is just now being fully realized.

In addition to providing such high-end amenities, Palmera Apartments has also taken advantage of the area's natural



splendor. The community features a 2.8-acre isolated wetland area in the center of the property. Residents, such as the elderly couple Lykes met during the Grand Opening, can enjoy the local wildlife and plant species thanks to a walking path that encircles the wetland.

"Children, adults and families on the walking paths make a life picture of laughter and fun," say residents Sue and Alan Martin. "We are greeted at the end of the work day by residents walking their dogs and bringing alive the sounds of the community. I awake to the sounds and sights of the winds joined by flocks of birds and ducks flying in unison against the colors of the nature preserve. We feel abundantly blessed with the joyful moments of living at Palmera."

Most residents agree there aren't many

reasons to leave Palmera, but they need only drive down the street for a host of additional entertainment, restaurant and shopping venues. The community is minutes away from three public golf courses, a water park, Kings Island amusement park and major highways. Its younger residents have access to one of the best school districts in the state and Money magazine recently named Mason as the 24th best small town in the country—due, in large part, to the quality of education.

All of this adds up to care-free, luxury living.

"Palmera has a laid back feel, and residents don't have much to worry about," says Assistant Marketing Director Lexi Kopilchack, who served as Palmera's Leasing Manager when the community first opened. "Residents know that they live in the nicest apartment community in one of the nicest areas and they know if any issues arise, they'll be taken care of quickly. It feels like resort living every day."

All In the Family

When Ben Colaco signed his lease with Palmera Apartments in 2011, he never expected to get an apartment *and* a wife.

"I met my future wife at the very first Palmera happy hour event," says Colaco. "We love living here and have many other great memories, but that is by far the best one—and I think my wife would agree."

Palmera Apartments offered these regular happy hour events before the com-





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munity even had a clubhouse or buildings as a way for new residents to “meet each other and talk about the excitement of waiting for their apartments to be ready,” Fenley says. “I think that’s why they all feel like such a part of something bigger.”

“Our favorite memory was watching the community being built and then knowing that it was finally finished,” say residents Durand and Bridgette Robertson. “It was a thrill to know that we were the first people to live in our new home.”

Today, the community also hosts pool parties, shopping days, beer tastings, costume contests, trivia night, bingo and breakfast at the gate. One of their most successful events was a kid’s concert featuring Grammy-nominated children’s recording artist Zak Morgan. Several associates say they’re still “singing the songs.” Residents also enjoy participating in local community service events, including everything from a Cystic Fibrosis Walk to a memorial blood drive.



“People just look out for one another, are polite to each other and actually care. Even the amount of waves exchanged is unbelievable.”

—*Mike Fenech*
Property Manager
Palmera Apartments

However, Palmera’s employees say they get just as much out of the events as their residents do.

“When I first started my leasing career, someone told me, ‘You’ll meet a lot of people—who knows, maybe you haven’t even met your best friend yet and they’ll end up moving into your apartment community,’” Kopilchack says. “As it turns

out for one another, are polite to each other and actually care. Even the amount of waves exchanged is unbelievable.”

Kopilchack is thrilled with the Community of the Year award, but she says it’s these personal experiences that have made the Palmera project worthwhile.

“When you hear, ‘All of your hard work will pay off,’ it’s hard to imagine in that moment exactly what the payoff will be,” she says. “None of us were in it for the payoff; we were just excited to be a part of it.” ■■

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