



Building hope

BY R. COLLINS

In 2013, Holland, Michigan resident Krista Mason adopted a local plot of land and began the construction of a small series of homes, which would soon bring new meaning and hope to those affected by autism and their families. It was the beginning of Benjamin's Hope, now a growing nonprofit and publicly funded residential community that has raised more than \$13 million to build new structures designed to provide residents impacted by autism with full, active lives among friends.

Mason, founder and manager of Benjamin's Hope, said the organization was inspired by her and her husband's

youngest son, Benjamin, who is profoundly impacted by autism and thus had a unique set of requirements for both the residential and activity spaces around him.

"We started thinking about what adult life is going to look like when we're not around, that's what really inspired this," Mason said.

At the center of the vision was the desire to create meaningful programs for Benjamin Mason and now more than 20 other residents to provide them with dignified methods of expression and community contribution. The result is an active farmstead community dedicated to utilizing nat-





ural resources in everyday activities; volunteering within the communities of Holland and Zeeland, Michigan; and daily worship. When invited to design a central worship and multipurpose structure, Brent Dykstra, senior architect and residential studio leader at AMDG Architects in Grand Rapids, Michigan, appreciated Krista Mason's vision, sensibilities, and value to design in leaving no detail ignored for the pre-existing residential homes.

"I think it would be tempting and easy to take the path of least resistance and provide something that's maybe fundamentally utilitarian," Dykstra said. "I appreciate that there was a desire from [Mason] and Benjamin's Hope to build something special and beautiful, and to enhance programming, living, worshiping, and playing with a building that was special and not something that was un-inspired or not well thought-out."

To achieve maximum functionality while complementing the largely agriculturally

driven daily program at Benjamin's Hope, Dykstra and Mason began thinking about the basic qualities of on-site silos for storing materials in bulk as well as classic and durable gable roofs. The three programmatic elements Dykstra applied to the interior design of the multi-purpose center—such as worship and multipurpose space; office and administration; and in-between connector spaces—were required to perform multiple jobs as Benjamin's Hope adapts and grows.

Dykstra and Mason sought to locate aspects in which these programmatic elements overlapped, such as in the main worship space itself: a vast-yet-intimate, peaked interior lined with a folding partition in place of a wall. The partition is composed of large clusters of windows that can be folded in sections like an accordion to reveal a spacious and hooded outdoor patio, and what Dykstra deems a "long view" of the meticulously-kept property, allowing a porous flow of visitors from indoors to the patio and lawns.

Dykstra also designed the ceiling of the worship space to cradle sounds in its peak through the use of acoustical treatments and a unique tiered paneling structure, which also provided an aesthetically pleasing element to the interior's overall design. From the ceiling—reinforced by the roof structure—hooks for swings allow participants to have a more sensory experience during their worship sessions and provide them with a seating solution that adapts to their needs.

"Sitting in a quiet church service is never going to happen. But we talk about dignity-based communication and presuming intelligence," Mason said. "It's not a dumbed-down Sunday school session. It's a little shorter in duration, but if you're a 30-year-old man, you don't want someone speaking down to you; that's insulting. So, we work very hard at our culture of being one that respects in age appropriate and dignified ways."

Another multipurpose feature in the welcome and worship center is the living room-style meeting center where representatives from Benjamin's Hope meet prospective parents and their adult children who may have never received care away from home. Considering this, Dykstra sought to create an immediate welcoming atmosphere. The space is accessed through a suite of administrative offices—organized with minimal barriers between work spaces—and guests are greeted by a bright, cheerful assortment of furniture and a hand-painted portrait of Benjamin's Hope's two alpacas residing in the modern barn a short walk away. The meeting space was designed with comfort and visibility in mind and windows lining the walls reveal the rest of the worship center.

"There were elements like that which we were being particular about so that the architecture could reinforce a hospitable care and loving nature, because I think fundamentally, Benjamin's Hope is a very special place," Dykstra said.

While the programmatic aspects of Benjamin's Hope's daily operations determined many design concepts, the materials composing the worship and multipurpose center were required to be simple, yet durable. Corrugated metal, concrete, drywall, Douglas Fir plywood and beams, and exposed bolts came together to produce a refined structure that was also reinforced for changing programmatic elements and Michigan's unpredictable weather. Dykstra wanted to dignify a palette of ordinary materials to produce a special composition that although may not achieve high-end design goals, could produce an extraordinary design life.

Similarly, the residential apartments built first on the property utilized hearty materials and design practices such as dry-



wall with rounded edges and reinforced with wire mesh; acoustic ceiling padding; wooden blinds placed between window panes; and in-ground shower drains to ensure a long life for products residents use daily. Exposed beams, high ceilings, and shades of white and light grey accent the four living suites, main living room, and kitchen to create an airy, livable interior.

Each home backs into a woodland trail full of flowers, shrubs, and woven pathways, skirting the Benjamin's Hope property, and providing residents with access to an equally serene outdoor landscape. Mason said each resident also brings a beautiful contribution to both the Benjamin's Hope community and the surrounding communities. Each day, groups from Benjamin's Hope can be found volunteering throughout the greater Holland area, visiting farmers' markets, gardening, and trail walking. Mason also placed a farm stand at the property's entrance and Benjamin's Hope residents fill it every summer with herbs and produce grown on the property. The farm stand also showcases products such as hand-made, hand-packaged soaps made with lavender and other plants that residents plant, pick, dry and then bring to local farmers markets.

"For a lot of families, when their child receives a diagnosis of autism, it can be very frightening," Mason said. "Even though someone [might be] highly impacted by autism, it doesn't mean their lives aren't full and purposeful."

In 2018, Mason looks forward to the

completion of the worship and welcome center's newest addition: a greenhouse that will transform Benjamin's Hope's horticulture program into a year-round practice, and complement Mason and Dykstra's goals for the center to adapt with organizational needs.

Dykstra said initially he wanted to understand the context behind the structure's design concepts and then create an appropriate space to enhance Benjamin's Hope's mission as a live, work, play, and worship community. It is a mission Dykstra shares a passion for as a part of AMDG Architects, a West Michigan-based architecture and design firm whose portfolio spans from residential and educational spaces to office, healthcare, and fitness complexes, all established on the principle that design should serve an elevated purpose and higher power. West Michigan-based construction firm, CL Construction, built the welcome and worship center with an intuition for practical design that Dykstra said was an invaluable asset to the project.

Dykstra, now a member of the Benjamin's Hope board of directors, said his visits to the welcome center in which he can see guests utilizing the patio on picturesque summer nights gives him joy and proves that he and Mason achieved their design and missional goals.

"When there can be the desire and the ability to deliver it, I think you can get something special, and I think that something special is what we accomplished."

