

Mid-Columbia Habitat for Humanity plans to build four houses in Lyle. The newest—and the second to be completed—is on the left.



A House to Call Home

Habitat for Humanity volunteers come together to build much-needed housing

By Jeanie Senior

What Habitat for Humanity calls “simple, decent, affordable” housing is in short supply in the Columbia River Gorge. One house at a time, volunteers with Mid-Columbia Habitat for Humanity are working to change that situation.

A burgeoning real estate market has not helped the shortage. When Mid-Columbia Habitat for Humanity was formed 11 years ago to serve White Salmon, Bingen, Snowden, Husum, Underwood, Lyle and the Hood River

Valley, “Lots were going up faster than we could save money,” says board member and volunteer Stan Horack, who lives in White Salmon.

Stan explains that even though prices have gone down some, they are still high. Mid-Columbia Habitat for Humanity has not built enough houses to accumulate much capital.

“One of the reasons we are in rural Klickitat County is because we can find land,” says Roger Holen, head of Mid-Columbia Habitat for Humanity’s board of directors.

The fledgling Mid-Columbia Habitat eventually was able to buy a lot in Odell to build its first house. A second Habitat house went up in White Salmon.

Now, the count is up to four. In

October, volunteers put the final touches on the second of four houses Habitat will build on a parcel of land in Lyle.

The new house that Lou and Lisa Houston and their two daughters will move into this fall has two floors, three bedrooms, 1½ baths and more than 1,100 square feet of floor space. The girls picked the colors for their bedrooms: one bright pink, the other an exuberant blue. Each marked her room with a set of handprints on the back wall of the closet.

The Houstons, who worked on construction of their home, will complete the landscaping after they move in.

It is important to note that Habitat houses are not free. Homeowners make regular mortgage payments, with the proceeds used to build more Habitat houses.

Before work begins on a house, applicants complete a selection process that examines their housing needs and their ability to make monthly mortgage, utility and insurance payments. An applicant also is required to have lived within the Mid-Columbia Habitat service area for at least a year.

A family selection committee reviews applications and then interviews applicants. When an applicant passes the first step, there is a home visit, followed by credit, references, employment and background checks.

Each Habitat partner family is obligated to put 500 hours of work into their house, a requirement known as sweat equity. Partner families also are expected to work on other Habitat houses.

Family and friends can donate their labor on behalf of the family. Lyle minister Les Harsted, also a licensed plumber, did plumbing work on the Houston's house.

Roger, an Intel retiree and former

White Salmon mayor, likes to say it takes a whole community to build a Habitat house, a comment backed by a partial list of the people and businesses who contributed time and products to Habitat construction.

It includes the large crew of volunteers working on each house. Stan, a retired engineer who has volunteered for Habitat for 11 years and has helped build houses in The Dalles and for Mid-Columbia Habitat for Humanity, estimates there are perhaps 25 to 30 "regulars."

Some of the businesses that donated services include electrician Britt Lee of Hood River, owner of Triple Nickel Electric; Brown Roofing of The Dalles, which charged for the cost of shingles but not for installation; DeHart Construction, which provided free equipment for a day; K&L Kitchens, which sold the kitchen cabinets at cost; and Ed Fousel of Appleton, who did sheetrock work and painting. All of the donations make the houses more affordable.

Whirlpool Corp. donates a range and a refrigerator to each Habitat house built in the United States, and sells other appliances at cost to new partner families. Yale Locks & Hardware furnishes all of the lock sets, and Hunter Douglas provides free window shades for privacy areas, such as bedrooms and bathrooms.

"Lyle has been a good community to work in," Roger says. "We've had a number of people step forward and furnish free stuff. We met with the community council and found good support, and the community has responded well."

As each house is built, the homeowners' mortgage payments provide funding to purchase more land and build more houses. The Dalles Habitat helped Mid-Columbia Habitat purchase the parcel of four lots in Lyle. The two organizations share ownership of the property.

The Lyle School Board declared surplus and donated to Habitat a steep and unbuildable 25-foot strip of land adjacent to its bus parking lot, which provided the required setbacks for each house.

The Klickitat County Commission provided two \$30,000 grants, in 2008 and 2009, from the county's affordable housing surcharge fund. The Mid-Columbia Board of Realtors holds annual fundraising events for Habitat and most recently gave \$3,000 to the Mid-Columbia and The Dalles Habitats.

Roger says if anyone is interested in volunteering, there are a lot of needs. Volunteers can do other tasks besides construction. They can, for example, serve on the family selection committee, which also stays involved with partner families, providing any needed help with financial counseling as well as instruction regarding house maintenance.

Help with fundraising, grant writing and publicity always is welcome, he says.

"Without grant writers and individual donations, we wouldn't survive," he says.

Whatever the task done for Habitat, "It's always rewarding," Roger adds. "Very rewarding." ■



Volunteers Don Wanzek, left, and Stan Horack in the kitchen of an almost-complete Habitat for Humanity house in Lyle. The organization welcomes additional volunteers for other tasks in addition to construction.