

# HABITAT

From page 1

years ago, she hit a rough patch and remembered seeing the ex-president talk about the program on television.

"It never crossed my mind until recently and I looked them up," said Ms. Eveson, 43.



EVERSSON

She is a single mother who works as a customer service representative for Lee Memorial Health System. Last year, after completing Habitat's application process, including a credit check and review of her salary and living situation, Ms. Eveson was able to purchase the three-bedroom home with a two-car garage and a fenced-in yard.

"It was exciting," she said. "I actually cried. It was surreal or something, like a dream."

Like other Habitat homeowners, she put \$1,200 down for the closing costs and her monthly payment is 30 percent of her income. She is also required to complete classes on homecare and put in 300 hours of "sweat equity"—working for Habitat either on her own home, others' homes or in some volunteer capacity. But she is allowed to recruit family or friends to help her finish it.

Habitat traditionally builds its homes from the ground up, but Ms. Eveson's home typifies how Habitat has used the recent housing crisis to its advantage. It began buying foreclosed homes cheaply and placing clients in them.

Habitat pays \$60,000 to \$90,000 to build a home, said Lee spokesperson Trisha Goins,

but it can now buy a foreclosed home for half to one-third that cost. The organization usually finishes 90 to 100 homes per year, but because of buying up foreclosures, it's on pace to reach 130 in 2009.

"We can't just let the whole community go down in value," Ms. Goins said. "We wanted to come up with a way we could help stimulate the economy and create community stability."

Lee's Habitat for Humanity is supported by hundreds of individuals, churches and businesses, including the Whirlpool Corp., which donates appliances. Last year, Lee's Habitat for Humanity received \$11.5 million in cash, grants, land, materials and through sales at its the thrift store. About 95 percent was spent on building homes and about 5 percent on administrative costs. Lee's affiliate also doesn't accept money from the federal government.

The other three Habitat affiliates that have reached the 1000-home milestone are located in Collier County, Jacksonville and Atlanta, Ga., the organization's headquarters.

"Down in Florida, we can build all year long," Ms. Goins explained.

Lee's affiliate also donates 10 percent of its client's mortgage payments to Habitat operations overseas, which bring its total number of homes up to 1,700.

Worldwide, Habitat has built about 300,000 homes in 90 countries.

On Saturday, March 14, at 8:30 a.m., the 1000th home, at 5011 Moon Lane in LaBelle, will be finished with a dedication ceremony and breakfast in honor of Mr. Fuller. Call 652-0434 to RSVP for the event.

"They've been a real beacon of hope now for 1,000 families, in mobilizing tens of thousands of volunteers in Lee County and Southwest Florida," U.S. Director Mr. Seidel said. "We're so happy that they've reached this milestone and are pushing on past a thousand and serving hundreds more families in the years to come." ■


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