

*FORSYTH HABITAT FROM HUMANITY DIRECTOR
TO RETIRE AT YEAR'S END*

Continued from Page 1

who will carry on the organization's ecumenical mission of providing local families in substandard housing with a chance to build their own affordable home.

Lord said she originally planned to stay on as director for no more than five years, but the job and its challenges grew along with her commitment. "I wanted to get Habitat to a really strong position staff-wise, board-wise and financially," she said. "It was extremely important to me that this transition be made from a position of strength so that it would be very smooth and we would not lose any momentum."

Momentum and energy have never been in short supply, either for Lord personally or for the agency she has led.

"For a while, just building a house was a major project and it took us four to six months. Now we can build energy-efficient, high-quality houses in 10 to 12 weeks using a variety of lovely designs," she said.

By the end of the year, HabitatForsyth will have built 197 homes since 1985; of those, 127 will have been built during Lord's comparatively short tenure as director. And Lord has challenged her staff and the community to maintain the escalating rate of building: This year, HabitatForsyth will build 20 homes; by 2009, the agency is planning on building 30 homes. With more than 3,000 families in need of affordable housing locally, the agency has been one of the few area builders addressing a chronic shortage of such housing, according to "Vision 2005: A Comprehensive Plan for Forsyth County, North Carolina."

The acceleration is fueled by a shift in strategy over the years. In the past, Habitat found and improved land one parcel at a time. Brand new homes – and eager families – would be dropped into neighborhoods that ultimately couldn't provide support for change.

Today that is changed. Families are now living in neighborhoods that have been redefined from top to bottom as HabitatForsyth and local community associations, community development corporations and the city of Winston-Salem recognize that a tide cannot be turned one house at a time. It takes critical mass.

"Through the revitalization of run-down, at-risk high-crime areas, HabitatForsyth was able to return communities to the way they used to be: full of families enjoying safe streets, sidewalks for playing, neighborhoods of friends."

With that formula, the responsibility of maintaining an upbeat



Kay Lord

community shifts from one set of shoulders to many in the neighborhood. And as importantly, it shifts the focus from enforcement to enjoyment.

"Less obvious, but also important were the reduced police calls, higher property values and improved neighborhoods that ring the downtown area," Lord said. Those changes make recruiting businesses to the area – and potential employees – much easier.

An equally important aspect to HabitatForsyth's mission, according to Lord, is eliminating substandard housing.

"We want to be sure that we demolish as many substandard houses as we can. When we move a family out of substandard living conditions we want to try and make sure that another family doesn't move in right behind them," she said. "Eliminating substandard housing is our goal and our work in neighborhoods and our more progressive programs all reflect that goal."

In the process, Lord said that Habitat Forsyth must act as a catalyst among other organizations to reach their goals. "At 20, even 30 houses a year, Habitat can never eliminate substandard housing. By partnering with other housing groups and the city, we can all work toward eliminating substandard housing and creating healthy, happy and safe neighborhoods."

Building better homes is just one ingredient. Another essential ingredient, according to Lord, is finding and supporting hard-working families.

"We believe that education before a family moves into a home is extremely important; preventative measures are always more successful than those taken to fix a problem," Lord said. "Families take courses in financial literacy, credit, budgeting, home-maintenance and repair, yard maintenance, understanding legal documents, mediation, and responsibilities of home ownership and living in a neighborhood."

The courses at Habitat, coordinated by the Family Service Department, prepare its students for a life of not just owning their home, but of owning their community.

"Our families 'adopt' their new neighborhood even before they move in and are challenged to figure out a way to make a difference."

For instance, according to Lord, families in the Old Greensboro Road neighborhood banded together to participate in the "Adopt a Stream" project, clearing a nearby stream of trash and debris. This common experience provides neighbors with a willfulness to help one another. "Our homeowners get comfortable going to City Council meetings. They know who to call in city government. They register to vote. They take pride in knowing they can and will make a difference."

Lord said that this is, after all, what it is all about, and what she knows she'll remember.

"Watching the homeowners achieve their dreams will always be my favorite part of the job. All we've really done is offered a hand," she said. "Families come to Habitat determined to be successful."

As Lord sees it, encouraging such determination pays dividends far into the future.

"It is especially touching to hear the children talk about how proud they are of their parents. They learn an important life lesson during the process and their lives are changed as well. Homeownership provides stability, security and the opportunity to become financially strong and independent.... Children are directly influenced. They start talking about going to college and owning a home of their own one day."

Children are rarely far from Kay Lord's mind. In fact, it is the presence of two grandchildren that finally got Lord to consider stepping aside.

"I have had two very demanding jobs over the past 20 years," Lord said. "But now I feel very strongly that it is time to focus on family and friends and be involved on a part-time basis in the community."

Come the first of January, Lord's hands will remain full. The only difference will be that she'll be holding a grandchild in each one.

THANK YOU



REP. LARRY WOMBLE NC House of Representatives

71st District
Tel (336) 784-9373
Fax (336) 784-1626
E-mail: LWistm@aol.com

Home Address:
1294 Salem Lake Road
Winston-Salem, NC 27107