



Bruce
Cherney

Building a community

EDITOR'S COMMENT

Literally hundreds of members of the Winnipeg REALTORS® Association are volunteers within the community. They could be the referee at your son's pee-wee hockey game or daughter's ringette game, someone who rubs shoulders with you when you're collecting money for your favourite charity, or helping you stack sandbags to save homes threatened by rising floodwater.

Prior to the recent May 22 provincial election, REALTORS® volunteered their time to host the 2007 Provincial Leaders Forum at the Franco-manitobain Cultural Centre which gave Manitobans an opportunity to hear the three leaders discuss election issues.

During his time in office former Winnipeg Mayor Glen Murray told the *WREN* that he was amazed by the number of REALTORS® who were committed to volunteering their time and expertise to benefit the city.

"It was always remarkable to me, whether it was the Pan Am Games or fighting the (1997) flood, how often when I went to a volunteer organization and people handed out their business cards, it was someone who worked in real estate.

"They understand the value of community because they're so actively involved in it selling real estate ... they have a real appreciation of the needs of people.

"It's a community of people who take a great interest in public life and community service and give a lot of their time," he added.

The type of REALTOR® Murray was referring to is exemplified by Cindi French who has for the last two years been involved in Winnipeg Habitat for Humanity's Women Build.

This year, the Women Build volunteers are building a 1,500-square-foot, six-bedroom concrete home in St. Vital for an eight-member extended family headed by a single-parent refugee woman. The 35-year-old woman was originally a journalist in Sierra Leone and fled to Gambia when her father, brother and husband were killed during the conflict that had ravaged the African nation. The health-care aide, her mother and five children made their way to Winnipeg by 2003. Along the way, a two-year-old nephew was added to the family now living in a four-bedroom public housing apartment.

Recently, the basement for the family's new home was poured and Women Build is now preparing for their June 18 to 22 building blitz on Maralbo Avenue West. It will be the first time that a Habitat house will be entirely completed in Winnipeg by an all-women construction team.

As a REALTOR® performing her everyday job, French discovered she was unable

to help less-fortunate Winnipeggers fulfill their homeownership dreams.

"As REALTORS®, we know it's almost impossible for the working poor to buy a home," she added.

The revelation that there was another way to help came when she was presenting seminars on various aspects of the real estate industry for community groups. One of the groups she met two years ago during a seminar was Women Build, the organization founded by Habitat for Humanity International in 1991 — the local chapter was formed just three years ago.

French felt Women Build was "an obvious connection" to fulfill her desire to help those normally shut out of the real estate market because of their financial circumstances. The ladies of Women Build arrived at the same conclusion and asked her to join.

It helped that French had fund-raising contacts, as a REALTOR® had sold newly-built homes and wasn't afraid to wield a hammer or a saw.

French said she liked the Women Build concept because it was empowering women in an area normally reserved for the opposite sex.

As one of 14 women serving on the Women Build steering committee, French said she now witnesses first-hand how women are able to work toward the common goal of securing homes for working-poor Winnipeg families. (Successful Habitat clients are required to be working full-time, be able to carry an interest-free mortgage and provide 500 hours of sweat-equity in Habitat projects which includes 100 hours in their own home.)

When the women poured the basement on May 22 for the new home in St. Vital, "we went in wholeheartedly," added French.

In preparing to build the house structure, the women were required to take training in

the Logix system of insulated-concrete forms to build walls. For three consecutive days from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., the women received instruction in the house construction system.

But even before they received their training, it was found that they would be short four volunteers. No problem. French called up four women — a mortgage broker she had done business with and three women she had sold homes to — all were willing to take on a new challenge.

That's typical of what REALTORS® bring to the table as volunteers in the community. They have know-how and organizational skills honed during the regular performance of their chosen occupation.

"REALTORS® are involved in the community they serve," said Canadian Real Estate Association president Ann Bosley. "REALTORS® not only care about where people live, but how they live ... and make tremendous contributions to our communities."

A 2007 membership survey conducted for CREA found that 66 per cent of Canadian REALTORS® are active volunteers in their communities.

In recognition of the role REALTORS® play organizing volunteer efforts, CREA at its annual meeting established the Canadian REALTORS Care™ Foundation to co-ordinate the collection, administration and distribution of charitable donations on behalf of REALTORS® across Canada.

While French has chosen Women Build to help others realize their homeownership dream, other real estate agents and brokers have been directly involved in the REALTOR®-established Housing Opportunity Partnership, which has bought, renovated and sold nearly 60 homes to low- and modest-income Winnipeggers.

Volunteerism is a concept well understood by REALTORS®.