

"Home Green Home"

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Realizing the American Dream

By Sonja J. Keith

North Little Rock families have a new opportunity to live their dream and still “go green” thanks to the work of the Argenta Community Development Corporation.

Just ask Yolanda Mathis.



Two months ago, Yolanda and her three children moved into a “green” home and today are proud to be “the first family” to reside in a LEED-Gold (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certified home in Arkansas. “I’m happy to be living here,” she said. “It’s very comfortable and easy to take care of.”

The Argenta CDC has been in the business of helping families with affordable housing for a number of years, according to Brad Williams, but it wasn’t until recently that officials recognized an obligation to use a more sustainable approach with development practices. In 2007, “Building Green” was launched with the CDC partnering with the Arkansas Chapter of the U.S. Green Building Council to design, construct and promote affordable energy efficient homes for low-to-moderate income families.

“Building Green represents a new era in our construction practices, integrating affordable housing with environmental sustainability and energy efficiency,” Brad said. “The homes in this project are designed, built and are constructed of high-performance features that will save the homeowner money, provide a healthier indoor environment, require less maintenance and have a positive impact on the environment.”

The first four Building Green homes that conserve energy and natural resources were built last summer in North Little Rock’s Holt Neighborhood. Five more affordable green homes are in the pipeline for construction.

The brick homes are 1,300 square feet and feature three bedrooms, two bathrooms, a living room/dining room combo, a fully equipped kitchen, a laundry room and a privacy fence.

The selling price for the homes begins at \$96,500, with various assistance programs available to those who qualify. Brad noted that the city of North Little Rock has been very generous in providing

subsidies to help individuals realize the American dream of owning a home. "It provides an opportunity for some who would like to become a homebuyer for the first time."

Brad said Gardner Methodist Church has also been a "terrific partner," providing financial assistance to those needing help with a down payment or closing costs. "They certainly care about the neighborhood and have taken a leadership role."

The Argenta CDC's green efforts have not gone unnoticed. The Building Green homes are among only 21 projects out of nearly 175 that have earned GOLD-LEED status. Only 19 have achieved the platinum level.

Launched as a pilot program in 2005, LEED-H® is a green home ratings system (from certified to platinum) that assures residents their homes are designed and built to be energy and resource efficient and provide better indoor air quality.

All homes in the Building Green initiative are expected to earn a LEED-H certification. They have been built to be at least 30 percent more efficient than traditionally built homes. Some of the energy-saving amenities include gap-proof insulation, tight air and duct sealing, and a higher efficiency heating and cooling unit. The use of compact fluorescent bulbs in lighting fixtures, energy efficient windows, ventilation fans and low flow faucets also contribute to reduced utility bills.

Residents are also trained on how to maintain their home, with the Argenta CDC providing a manual that offers maintenance tips and resources along with a "green" basket of sustainable household products and other resources.

Providing affordable housing has been at the heart of the organization, according to Brad, and supporting "green" housing is a natural fit. While slightly more expensive on the front-end, "green" homes will save homeowners money after they move in.

"Affordable housing can be green," he said. "Coupled with providing quality homeownership opportunities for low-to-moderate income families, we have designed homes that can ease our buyers' utility burden.

"We understand that energy costs take an even greater percentage of the monthly budget for many families that we serve. The CDC feels it is part of our mission to build homes that will be affordable to buy and affordable to live in."

The four "green" homes were completed last fall but there was little interest in purchasing them. When Little Rock TV stations broadcast stories on the homes, interest picked up. "Suddenly they all went in a row," Brad said.

"When I found about the 'green' houses, I checked it out. When I saw this house, I said, 'This is my house,' and I got it," Yolanda said.

Interest has continued, especially in light of the LEED certification. "Slowly we are taking the neighborhood back," Brad said.

While Yolanda has only lived in her home for two months, she has already noticed a marked difference in her utility bills – almost half of what she had expected. "The light and water bills are low. I can tell this is different." Yolanda also likes the green cleaning products, explaining that she and her daughter have allergies and the cleaners are less irritating.

The relationship with the homeowners doesn't end when they receive the keys to their house, according to Williams. The Argenta CDC has a holistic approach to home ownership.

In 1998, the Argenta CDC expanded its scope of services and became a certified NeighborWorks America homeownership center. The center provides the full range of services needed to purchase and maintain a home. "Since its inception we have had close to 3,000 program graduates and referred more than \$40,400,000 in mortgage loans for closing to lenders."

The building "green" initiative and NeighborWorks center are just two of five of the areas of focus for the Argenta CDC. Other areas of focus include:

- Single-family and multi-family housing development.
- Commercial property development.
- Community development and outreach.

The Argenta CDC traces its roots to the late 1980s and early 90s, when Downtown North Little Rock was plagued by high crime, historic homes deteriorated and property values dropped. In response, residents and property owners organized the CDC – a private nonprofit organization – in 1992 to take back their neighborhood. Community members believed that home ownership would serve as a catalyst for neighborhood improvement and began strategizing about how best to promote the area as attractive to prospective homeowners.

To date, the organization has renovated and constructed 162 residential and commercial properties including a 56-unit apartment complex, investing over \$13 million in Downtown North Little Rock's renewal efforts. The group has also received numerous awards for its efforts.

Along the way, property values have gone up while the crime rate has gone down.

"Our organization's history is one of making homeownership possible for more people by rehabilitating, designing and building quality homes at affordable prices," Brad said. "Our development approach has earned national recognition but most importantly, we have transformed lives and communities through our mission."

Her new home has already meant a lot to Yolanda. She enjoys it so much, it is difficult for her to identify just one favorite thing about it. "I like the location because it is close to my mom. I like the style. I like everything about it."

For more information on the Argenta Community Development Corporation and its "green" initiatives, please go to www.argentacdc.org or call 501.374.0622.

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