

Homeowners find help in ReStore-ation Project

Habitat store helps put families in first homes

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Once a pillar on auto row, there's a building on Peoria's Main Street that supports area homeowners - present and future.

The Habitat for Humanity ReStore, 804 W. Main St., sells home furnishings, appliances, sinks and tile - at drastically reduced prices - with proceeds helping an organization that works to put families in their first home.

Once, this stretch of Main Street was devoted to getting families their first car. The ReStore building is one of many surviving structures on the street built to showcase autos.

"This was a Dodge dealership and later for American Motors," said Habitat executive director Fred Kowalske, pointing to the original white tile on the showroom floor.

If you bought a car in Peoria in the first half of the 20th century, chances are you bought it on Main Street, said Terry Doyle, who retires this week from his auto repair business, located just off Main Street at 923 N. Garfield Ave.

Now in its third year at the Main Street location, the ReStore has begun to develop a following, Kowalske said. "This store did \$250,000 in sales last year," he said, referring to new and used windows, doors and other supplies purchased there.

"Builders will donate extra stuff along with people who give us items they no longer need," he said of what's stocked on ReStore shelves.

The money taken in helps run the Habitat's local chapter, said Kowalske.

"We have 12 people on staff - three work full-time on construction," he said.

The chapter wants to build seven homes in the Peoria area in 2008, said Kowalske. "Our biggest problem is finding places to build. There are only so many lots available we're able to use. The whole trick is to keep it simple and affordable," he said.

Founded nationally in 1976, Habitat for Humanity's central Illinois chapter has built 72 homes in Peoria, Tazewell, Woodford and Marshall counties since opening in 1989.

"One of our biggest challenges is a problem of perception. People think we give these houses away and that's not the case," said Kowalske, 70, who retired after 41 years as a Peoria advertising executive, taking over as Habitat director three years ago.

"If they saw the commitment these people make, the sweat equity they put in, they'd realize how much they have involved," he said.

Volunteers are another part of the Habitat story, said Kowalske. "Our volunteers put in 3,500 hours last year. We're definitely a volunteer-supported organization," he said.

Volunteers help man the ReStore under co-managers Jim Greiner and R.D. Campbell, said Kowalske, adding that church groups, contractors and area companies help with construction of Habitat homes.

"We're always looking for support. There's more than one way to build a house. Not everyone can swing a hammer," he said.

Kowalske would also like to help improve some of Peoria's older neighborhoods - beyond building new homes.

"I'd love to work with the city and other groups on a project similar to what I saw in Indianapolis," he said.

Kowalske referred to Fall Creek Place, an Indianapolis neighborhood once called "Dodge City" because of the number of shootings in the area. A federally funded renovation program has resulted in the acquisition of dilapidated homes, the installation of new streets and sidewalks plus a big assistance from Habitat builders, he said.

"It's a model program. I'd love to see us do something like that in Peoria, maybe near the medical district, in the East Bluff," said Kowalske, noting he hopes to talk with OSF Saint Francis Medical Center about such a project.

In the meantime, there's plenty to do at ReStore, the most visible location the organization has ever had, he said. "Our previous offices were houses - one on the (near) north side, the other on South Adams near the (Chiefs) ballpark," said Kowalske.

With 12,000 square feet at the Main Street location, the ReStore might even be considered a "small box store," he said. "It's a great location. We're right in the middle of where our market is," said Kowalske of neighborhoods off Main Street from Bourland Avenue to Sheridan Road.

But Kowalske doesn't like the term, "low-income housing," to describe such areas. "I prefer work-force housing. There's such a critical need in the area for good, safe housing," he said.

Home ownership is a big key to turning neighborhoods around, said Kowalske. "Owning a home changes people so much. Kids do better at school because there's continuity. People become more responsible," he said.

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