

Habitat for Humanity Week celebrated at NFM headquarters

By ANDREA GALABINSKI, nfmneighbor@breezenewspapers.com

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Habitat for Humanity of Lee County, headquartered in North Fort Myers, opened its doors on Thursday to celebrate a special week proclaimed in the organization's honor.

Habitat is a non-profit organization dedicated to eliminating substandard housing in Lee County, with like affiliates all over the world. Through the use of volunteer labor and donations of money and materials, Habitat builds housing for families who otherwise could not afford it. The homes are sold to the homeowners at no profit with an interest-free mortgage.

In 1995, Lee County and the City of Fort Myers declared the second week of March as "Habitat for Humanity Week." At that time, Habitat raised the roof on its 100th home in Lee County. Last year during this week, the organization lifted the walls on its 1,000th home.

"We opened our 12-plus acre campus to the community for an open house," said Vice President of Communications Trisha Goins. "Even though Habitat has been in the area since 1982, there are still many people that don't know we are here in Lee County.

"We are actually the largest Habitat chapter in the country," she said. "People don't really know how big our campus is, and many walk away astounded."

The campus includes administrative offices, a senior housing complex, a 27,000-square-foot thrift store and a pre-build warehouse.

"We also make it available to Habitat officials from other affiliates from all over the world. They visit regularly to look at operations and innovative programs we do here."

Homeowners that have benefitted from the nonprofit organization's work to provide affordable housing shared their Habitat experience at the open house. Soon-to-be newlyweds Ricardo Perez and Christina Colon, along with friend Nilsa Muniz, said the housing benefits are outstanding.

"It's difficult to get a house," said Perez. "We saw our future here, they gave us an opportunity."

The organization also accepted applications for its program and offered discounts at the Habitat's thrift store, which is one of the largest in Lee County.

North Fort Myers residents and shoppers Adele Howes and Maria Powness said they both thought highly of the thrift store.

"It's nice, and helps a lot of people," said Howes. "I bought a beautiful table here and the price was great."

"I've been shopping here for about four years, and some of the things helped furnish our whole dining room area," said Powness.

New Habitat Chief Executive Officer and president Katherine "Kitty" Green was on hand for the event. The announcement of her appointment came recently, and she officially took up her new duties March 2.

She took over the post after Vern Archibald, CEO for almost 20 years, retired from the non-profit organization.

"It's been great to be part of an organization that does so many wonderful things to help hardworking families achieve affordable housing," said Green.

Her background includes spending the last 10 years with the Bonita Bay Group, developer of seven master planned communities in Southwest Florida. While there, she was promoted five times, and resigned in 2009 as president and CEO. Green was responsible for the development of Verandah in east Lee County and Sandoval in Cape Coral.

A lifelong-resident of Fort Myers, Green has served as a volunteer for Habitat for nearly 15 years. Since 2002 she has served on Habitat's board of directors, most recently as vice chairman. She is also a member of the executive committee of the Lee County Horizon Council, heading up the 2010 Community Outreach Task Force and is a member of the Lee County Port Authority Special Management Committee and the Southwest Florida Expressway Authority. In 2008, Green was featured as one of Gulfshore Life's Women of the Year.

In his written announcement of Green's appointment, Charles Idelson, Habitat for Humanity of Lee County's chairman, said that the board selected Green based on her history with Habitat and successful track record in business management.

Habitat's North Fort Myers office is located at 1288 North Tamiami Trail in North Fort Myers (one block north of Pondella on Old 41). The phone number is 652-0434 and Web site is habitat4humanity.org.